

Paradox and the Fool in Seneca

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that Seneca's philosophical program and literary artistry are jointly coordinated to address and redress the pervasive experience of subverted expectations, i.e. the experience of paradoxicality, attributed to the unwise by Seneca's Stoic philosophy. With a focus on Seneca's *Epistulae Morales*, I suggest that Seneca's oft-noted paradoxical style reveals and is meant to reflect our fundamentally inconsistent (and thus dissatisfying) experience engendered, in his view, by the incoherency of our worldviews. While, as Seneca explores, our minds' operations hide this distressing contradiction from our attention, Seneca's subtle but steady exposure of it and its source attempts to work against this self-deception. The intended result for the reader is the recognition of their own role in their dissatisfaction and the resulting commitment to its remedy through philosophical training.

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Introduction

In this study I argue that paradox or paradoxicality in Seneca's works and the *Epistulae Morales* in particular provides an essential unifying foundation to Seneca's notion of ignorance, a means of its alleviation, and an important contribution to Senecan style and rhetoric. The standard Stoic conception of ignorance, as a mental state of incoherent and confused views, attitudes, and habits of thinking, anchors Seneca's Stoic works. Yet, for Seneca, the life of the ignorant person or "fool" (*stulti* or φαῦλοι) – among whom all but the rarest of humans number – is characterized above all by the experience, manifestation, and embodiment of paradox, each of which result solely from his foolishness. Most basically, ignorance is understood here as a state of mind in which we make any number of assumptions, many of which however are confused, ill-founded, and inconsistent, such that on the whole our state of mind is far removed from the ideal of being knowledgeable and wise. Paradox relates to ignorance because, insofar as we are in this state, the world presents itself as puzzling, confusing, and contrary to our expectations, which is to say, paradoxical. Whenever we come to hold certain views, whether general, such as that virtue matters greatly, or particular, such as that a present setback is not so bad, these views are ill-integrated with the rest of our attitudes. They are therefore unstable: we default to earlier assumptions; they are muddy; and insofar as they do not fit with other views we hold, we don't have a firm grip on them. This instability and the underlying incoherency of our states of mind are, in turn, manifested in our own lives – in thinking, affect, and action. Paradoxicality, thus, is an existential problem in Seneca, and it raises challenges for how to live.

By focusing on paradoxicality as an existential problem within ignorance, Seneca, we might say, makes it "ontological," *not* ultimately as a question for metaphysics but rather as a fundamental dilemma of the fool's mode of being and experience of reality that renders her

life dissatisfying and imperfect. And, I propose, it is as an artistic correlate to this theoretical “ontologizing” of paradox that we can better understand Seneca’s frequent use of paradoxicality as a stylistic, rhetorical, and pedagogical tool; indeed, these categories are mutually informing. As fools, we cannot but experience and exhibit paradoxicality. We can, however, come to recognize it as such, its effects, and its source – namely, our own foolish minds – and learn to navigate it in a beneficial, productive way. Seneca’s writings thus wield paradoxicality in and through their language, imagery, and rhetorical form so as to foster this salutary disposition in the reader.

My study, then, focuses on ignorance and on paradox in Seneca’s writing. On the broader philosophical front, it forms a part of a larger trend in epistemology as well as research on ancient epistemology, and even ethics and political philosophy, to look more closely at ignorance. This trend counters long-standing preoccupations with ideal states: knowledge, wisdom, and virtue. However, once we see that often we are in non-ideal states, we need to ask how we should act in order to improve, and what to do as long as we must assume that we and others are in non-ideal states.¹ Within the Classics, scholarly interest in Seneca’s use of paradox has a long history. The striking pointedness of Seneca’s prose has been remarked on – often negatively – since antiquity, including during his own lifetime.² In his early 20th century commentary on the *Letters on Ethics*, Walter Summers categorizes Seneca’s style on the whole as “pointed,” marks Seneca’s famous *sententiae* as no less well classified as “paradox” than “points,” and lists oxymoron and less direct paradoxes (such as, e.g.,

¹ See, e.g., Vogt (2012a) 25-50, Peels (2017), Gross and McGoe (2015), Peels and Blaauw (2016), and Fricker

² Thus, e.g., Caligula’s supposed remark that *Senecam harenam esse sine calce* (“Seneca is sand without lime [sc. to hold it together].”; Suetonius, *Cal.* 53) and Quintilian, *Inst.* 10.1.125-131 (esp. *si rerum pondera minutissimis sententiis non fregisset*; 129).

pati divitias; *Ep.* 5.6) as among Seneca's favorite ornaments.³ As scholars have again turned with renewed interest to Seneca since the early 60's, his use of paradox has been more explicitly linked to his readership's assumed ignorance. Two general, interrelated features of Senecan paradox have come to the fore.

First, scholars beginning with Alfonso Traina and his seminal study on Seneca's "language of interiority" have explored how Senecan vocabulary paired with his penchant for stylistic point rhetorically reflects and informs the revision in ethical outlooks that Seneca's Stoic writings develop, express, and defend.⁴ Seneca's Stoicism is essential to this paradox, for Stoicism rests on a number of fundamental and paradoxical positions, such as, for example, that only the sage is actually wealthy (for only he is truly not in need) or free (for only he truly does as he wants), while all us fools are poor slaves.⁵

Second, Senecan paradox itself facilitates this revision through its ability to juxtapose different frames of reference or modes of thinking in a concise yet destabilizing way so as to "shake up" the reader's mind, thus causing him to reconsider his commitments; the further effect is to initiate the shift in the reader's mind between an ignorant conceptual order and that of a Stoic wisdom,⁶ an order which has variously been construed around contrasting

³ Summers (1910) xv-xviii and lxxiv-lxxvii, cf. Motto and Clark (1975).

⁴ Traina (1974) with Lotito (2001) and Williams (2015b) 145-147. In Traina's case, for example, the Stoic shift is from a happiness reliant on external possessions to wise "self-possession." See also Motto and Clark (1975), Moretti (1995), Cancik (1967), and Mazzoli (1991). It is in this vein that Brad Inwood (1995) has argued that Seneca uses Stoic paradoxes concerning the conception of "benefits" (*beneficium*) to bridge the gap between our common yet imperfect understanding of benefits and that of the Stoics. For a similar argument concerning political ethics, see Roller (2001) 64-124.

⁵ On these and other particularly famous Stoic paradoxes, see Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum*.

⁶ See, esp., Mader (1982), Stewart (1997), Lavary (1987), Schofield (1983), Lefèvre (1970) 69-74, Motto and Clark (1975), Graver (1996), Moretti (1995), Wilson (2008) 68-69, and Newman (1989) n. 17. Cf. the similar argument concerning paradox in Epictetus by Newman (1989): "But for those who want to be cured, the paradox serves not to confuse, but to shock and, thereby, to heal the sick judgment. The shock value of the paradox, like the use of diminutives, appeals more immediately to the emotion, and helps reinforce the rational *καλὸν* by jarring the emotional attachment to false opinion."

poles such as “internal-external” or “material-spiritual.”⁷ So, when Seneca writes, “I will show you a man who has been consul who is a slave [*servientem*] to a little old woman [i.e. for her inheritance], a rich man [*divitem*] to a handmaid, the most aristocratic youths in chains to actors” (*Ep.* 47.17), he challenges the reader to make sense of our unreflective and socially-imbued understanding of freedom as a “external,” legal and social condition, both good and indicative of good, by placing it alongside the suggestive implication of a self-imposed and debased “internal” slavery to one’s passions. In this, Senecan paradox forms an essential stylistic medium for Stoic learning, which, as Martha Nussbaum puts it, is an “increasing vigilance and wakefulness, as the mind, increasingly rapid and alive, learns to repossess its own experiences from the fog of habit, convention, and forgetfulness.”⁸

If my study takes these two general trends of interpretation as a relatively conventional and agreed-upon starting point, it nonetheless begins by complicating two basic assumptions behind them, and so allows for a more refined picture of Senecan paradox. Firstly, scholarship’s focus on Senecan paradox is primarily directed at his particular philosophical claims that run counter to common, received views (and, hence, are *para doxan*).⁹ These may be iterations or variations of the standard *paradoxa Stoicorum*, such as that “a sage can receive neither any injury [*iniuriam*] nor insult [*contumeliam*]” (*Const.* 2.1.5-6), or other less canonically prominent positions, such as that “*humanitas* is, hard to believe [*quis credat*], rare among mankind” (*Ep.* 115.3.5), especially as they are idiosyncratically construed oxymoronically (e.g. *quies inquieta*; *Ep.* 56.8.3). Yet as we will see in Chapter One, where we will clarify the ancient notion of “the paradoxical” in Greek and Roman literature up to Seneca’s time,

⁷ See Stewart (1997) 14 and Mader (1982) 72, respectively.

⁸ Nussbaum (1994) 340, cited by Williams (2015b) 136.

⁹ So, e.g., Mader (1982), Stewart (1997), Lavary (1987), Lefèvre (1970) 69-74, Moretti (1995), Roller (2001) 64-124, Inwood (1995), and Cancik (1967), and Williams (2015b) 146-147. Exceptions, such as Summers (1910) and Traina (1974) 35, take a broader view of Senecan paradoxicality.

these instances are certainly prominent, but they hardly cover the full range of what counted as “paradoxical.” The latter category includes not only declarative statements, but also entities and events in the world, word-play, jokes, stylistic antithesis, and other rhetorical maneuvers – whatever subverts one’s understanding or expectations about the world. Indeed, since the English term “paradox” risks eliding the difference between what we might understand as *a* paradox and the broader category of whatever is paradoxical, this study will standardly speak of a general “paradoxicality” rather than of paradox or paradoxes. In addition, a myopic attention on these declarative cases of Senecan paradoxicality obscures the significant affective dimension of paradoxicality, which will take an equally central place alongside doxastic counter-intuitiveness in this study.

Secondly, the paradoxicality of Seneca’s Stoic claims naturally suggests a wide gap between the ordinary, received conceptual framework and the conceptual order constituted by the paradoxes. When the reformative effect that paradoxicality exerts on a reader or listener has been considered, however, this gap is often misleadingly overstated as, for example, “a total inversion,”¹⁰ “two *opposing* value scales,”¹¹ or “irreconcilable.”¹² However, this study will argue that the force and aim of Senecan paradoxicality stem from exploiting not only the gap between our commonplace views and those of Stoicism but also the overlap between them. We will first detail in Chapter One the dialectical dynamics of paradox resolution for Seneca’s Stoic predecessor, Socrates, and his argument that his paradoxical claims in fact follow from deeper commitments that his objecting interlocutor already holds. And then, in Chapter Two, drawing on this, we will see that paradoxicality in Seneca’s Stoic works

¹⁰ As suggested by Stewart (1997) 10, with the resulting argument that Seneca’s Stoicism aims not merely to critique the contemporary Roman ethical system but upend it.

¹¹ Mader (1982) 71, emphasis mine. Compare also Roller (2001) 81.

¹² Cancik (1967) 136.

operates on a similar view: paradoxicality puts into sharp relief and facilitates the resolution of the fool's present if sometimes unconscious *confusion* – which constitutes his ignorance – between not-wholly-wrong received commitments and an inchoate yet still present acceptance of the counter-intuitive Stoic truths.

At the same time, this attention to the wider and deeper notions of paradoxicality surveyed in Chapters One and Two together with the underlying Stoic epistemological and psychological dynamics detailed in Chapter Two point towards a broader feature of Senecan paradoxicality. Seneca treats paradoxicality as, first and foremost, an ethical issue that intimately qualifies the nature and experience of our lives. This view has a precedent in Hildegard Cancik, who writes, comparing Seneca to Blaise Pascal, that

[Senecan paradox] is not a dialectical challenge like the famous *paradoxa Stoicorum* but is experienced as a form of existence... It is the preferred method of analysis for the human condition and, at the same time, a manifestation of a life of interiority.¹³

However, for Cancik, the paradoxical *Existenzform* of interest is that of the sage, in so far as his life *in the eyes of fools* is seen as paradoxical. But, although paradoxical to us, the sage's life and worldview is not itself paradoxical. Nonetheless, in Seneca, many paradoxical claims pointedly express the putative incomprehensibility of the sage's character and existence – claims that are antithetical to ours in her comprehensive attention to rational harmony with the cosmos. Yet my argument is, in a way, the flip-side of this: that paradoxicality in Seneca – which, in my study, includes a wider array of instantiations than in Cancik's – simultaneously constitutes and reveals the essence of the fool's cumulative experience, which in its actual contradictoriness truly makes no sense. On this reading, paradoxicality itself is “experienced as a form of existence,” and the experience of it is indicative of an imperfect ethical

¹³ Cancik (1967) 137: *Es ist nicht ein dialektisches Problem wie die berühmten paradoxa Stoicorum sondern wird als Existenzform erfahren... Es wird zum bevorzugten Mittel der Analyse der menschlichen Situation und gleichzeitig zur Manifestation eines Lebens aus der Innerlichkeit.*

state. Senecan paradox then becomes an essential means to elicit an awareness of this feature of our life, and thus a matter of immediate import to its flourishing or foundering.

To bear out these claims, we will develop in Chapters Three and Four two facets of this treatment at work, with particular attention given to the *Letters*. In Chapter Three, the mutually informing interaction between Seneca's theoretical and stylistic "ontologizing" of paradoxicality comes into clearest focus through Seneca's much-contested engagement with Platonism.¹⁴ Through the lens of paradoxicality, I'll suggest a new take on Seneca and Platonism: through a Platonized – but not Platonic – framing that nonetheless maintains the consistency of Seneca's proclaimed Stoicism, Seneca distinguishes between the distressing, unstable, and paradoxical "world" experienced by the fool as it is rendered by her ignorance, and the smooth-flowing, coherent, and satisfactory cosmos as experienced by the sage. Yet if this difference is ultimately phenomenological and rooted only in divergent states of mind, it is not experienced by fools as such, and the stylistic and rhetorical paradoxicality in Seneca's works aim to bring this disconnect into sharper relief through effecting and reflecting for the reader the existential experience of the fool. At the same time, this effect and how Seneca brings it about reinforces Seneca's account of the experience's psychological and epistemological cause.

Still, fostering the foolish reader's recognition of the sole role that his incoherent foolishness plays in creating his dissatisfying, paradoxical experience poses a particular challenge. This is a deeply paradoxical state of affairs, which runs counter to engrained, affectively powerful, yet faulty commitments the foolish mind holds about itself. As such, Seneca

¹⁴ For this scholarly discussion, which breaks largely into arguments for (1) Seneca's adoption of at least some Platonic positions, (2) Seneca's protreptic or pedagogic use of Platonism without real philosophical acceptance, or (3) Seneca's manipulation of Platonic themes and ways of thinking, see, e.g., Donini (1979) 151-273, Setaioli (1988) 117-140 and 505-510, Setaioli (2007) 342-347, Tieleman (2008), Reydam-Schils (2010), Schönegg (1999) 73-132, Sedley (2005), Natali (1994), Wildberger (2010), Boys-Stones (2013), and Inwood (2008).

contends in the *Letters*, our foolish mind actively works against the development of such self-awareness, and it does so in a way that renders dialectical argumentation for this essential Stoic claim generally ineffective. Instead of combating this self-ignorance, at least initially, through the direct dialectic evidenced by Socrates and the later Roman Stoic Epictetus, Seneca takes a more conciliatory and personal route: using vivid, first-person narratives in his *Letters*, Seneca constructs in his persona a sophisticated *exemplum* of a foolish mind that strives to make progress from within its own distorting, obfuscating self-ignorance towards an awareness of this very process. Such mimetic *exempla*, Seneca holds, are capable of more convincingly bringing the naturally recalcitrant listener or reader to “the matter at hand” (*rem praesentem*) than dialectic. Nonetheless, paradoxicality plays as large a role in this strategy as it does in Socratic and Stoic dialectic, for it is precisely through it in both the Senecan persona’s experience and the text itself that certain critical features of self-ignorance are brought to the reader’s attention.

While we will begin with the first extended first-person narrative in *Ep.* 12 to unpack Seneca’s approach, we will end with the famous, extended narrative series in the letters of the first half of Book Six, *Ep.* 53 through *Ep.* 57. These letters’ exemplarity is much discussed, but the traditional focus has been on the Stoic practices and topics treated individually in each letter.¹⁵ The *exemplum* that I argue for works at a deeper level on a more fundamental problem, plays an important role in the progression of Book Six and the *Letters* as a whole, and directly addresses from a new angle the debate over Seneca’s complicated relationship with dialectical argumentation.¹⁶ In their lead up to *Ep.* 58, these letters signal, on

¹⁵ See, thus, Griffin (1976), Schafer (2011), Henderson (2004) and (2006), Hachmann (1995), Mazzoli (1991), Berno (2006), and Motto and Clark (1971), (1973a), (1970), and (1973b).

¹⁶ See, esp., Wagoner (2014), who summarizes and engages with prior scholars (in particular, Cooper (2004), Inwood (2007b) esp. 218-219, and Barnes (1997b)) on the question of Seneca’s view on the philosophical value of dialectic.

the one hand, a uniquely conclusive employment of Seneca's mimetic strategy. But thereafter the *Letters*, with the intricate Platonic metaphysics surveyed in *Ep.* 58, begin to shift to more theoretical topics and a more dialectical mode. And, on the other hand, these letters' cumulative promotion of the sort of mindset that may see through the illusory experience of self-ignorance culminates at the end of *Ep.* 58: there, as we will see in Chapter Three, the most schematic and synoptic exposition of the ontological dilemma of paradoxicality and the fool waits to be driven home.

I hope to substantiate these claims in the following four chapters. What we will witness *in toto*, I propose, is a Seneca whose subtlety, insight, and creativity as both an author and a philosopher are not only evident but also mutually reinforcing and illuminating, rather than at odds with each other. Seneca's ceaseless attention to ignorance, the fool's experience, and fostering the Stoic life need not reflect the preoccupations of a "mere" rhetorical moralist; they might rather indicate a more humanistic attention to the imperfect human condition than earlier Stoic sources seem to display – and, in turn, they might further indicate a potentially fuller, more sympathetic picture of this state, which, if we believe Seneca and the Stoics, should be of immediate concern to us. This is, however, certainly not a comprehensive study of Senecan paradoxicality. I have by necessity been selective in my choice of works, passages for close examination, and facets of the paradoxicality-idea that I choose to explore. While my study is intended to open up a wider purview for the exploration of Senecan paradoxicality, much work remains to be done. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted, although I acknowledge the influence of Graver and Long (2015); Ker, Fantham, Hine, and Williams (2014); (Hine, 2010); and Griffin and Inwood (2011). The text of the *Epistulae Morales* and *Dialogi* are from Reynolds (1965) and (1977), of the *De Beneficiis* from Hosius (1914), and of the *Naturales Quaestiones* from Hine (1996).

The Ancient Notion of Paradoxicality up to the Time of Seneca

I: Introduction

Before we can move further into the nature and role of paradox in Seneca, we need to first get clear about the ancient notion of a paradox both in general within Greek and Roman thought up to the 1st century AD.¹ In Section II, we will begin with a discussion of the ancient terminology of paradox, in which we will see the surprisingly disparate array of entities identified as potentially paradoxical. I will use this discussion in particular to explore the different nuances within the language of paradox, nuances which will establish a preliminary, foundational distinction between two related features of ancient paradox, the effected affective reactions of surprise and awe and its essential counter-intuitiveness. In Section III, we will then explore in greater detail the nature of the paradoxical as what contradicts our worldviews in so far as they consist in received and considered beliefs and inform what we expect to find in the cosmos and how we expect it to function. This notion of a dynamic worldview, which constitutes not only what we think about the world and ourselves, including normative commitments, but also the fundamental conceptions through which our minds minimally interpret our experience, will prove critical to our study of Senecan paradox. Moreover, a vital part of paradox is its ability to be resolved through integration into our worldviews. In Section IV, by means of ancient examples, I will suggest that paradoxes resolve through the revision of our worldviews, the reinterpretation of what appears paradoxical, or a mixture of both. This latter approach, exemplified by Socratic elenchus, will take center stage, as it stands as a formative predecessor for the Stoics', including Seneca's, understanding of paradoxicality and its place in nature and human thought.

¹ For a helpful introduction to the ancient idea of paradox and the related notion of the marvelous, see the introduction to Hardie (2009b).

II: The Language of Paradox and Marvel

The Greek and Latin language for paradox consists in a web of related words and ideas. While the English word “paradox” derives from the Greek adjective παράδοξος (substantively τὸ παράδοξον), which means most broadly “contrary to belief or expectation”, the concept of the paradoxical² extends into the related terms θαυμαστός or θαυμάσιος (“marvelous” or “wonderful”) and their substantives θαῦμα and θαυμάσιον, as well as the even broader term ἄτοπος (“strange”, “absurd”, “extraordinary,” or, literally, “out of place”). In particular, the *paradoxon* is a subset of the *thaumaston*: what is *paradoxon* is equally *thaumaston*; both are surprising, marvelous, or awe-inspiring. But the *paradoxon* is surprising or incredible in a certain way, viz. in so far as it contradicts our considered expectations, which we will explore in greater depth in the next section. Since what is *thaumaston* may be *paradoxon*, and what is *paradoxon* is always *thaumaston*, they often appear synonymous. The titles of the works of the so-called “paradoxographers”, who collected instances of the marvelous and paradoxical in nature and human society, show well the close connection between the terms *thauma* and *paradoxon*.³ They range from Nymphodoros of Syracuse’s Περὶ τῶν ἐν Σικελίᾳ θαυματομένων (“On the marvelous in Sicily”) to Lysimachos’ Συναγωγή θηβαικῶν παραδόξων (“A compilation of Theban paradoxes”).⁴ Consider also Diodorus Siculus’ interchangeable use at 1.71, where he writes concerning the Egyptian kingship:

While it seems paradoxical [παραδόξου] that the king did not have total control over daily meals, it was far more remarkable [θαυμασιώτερον] that they were not allowed to mete out justice nor do any business at random nor to punish anyone in hubris or

² The Greeks, at least by the time of Polybius, did in fact talk of “paradoxicality”: Polybius opens his histories with the claim that “the very paradoxicality of the events” (αὐτὸ... τὸ παράδοξον τῶν πράξεων; 1.4.1) described in his text will motivate everyone to read his work.

³ On this tradition and its origins, see Schepens and Delcroix (1996), Thomas (2000) 135-167, Romm (1992) 82-120, and Krevans (2005) 86-96.

⁴ Schepens and Delcroix (1996) 381.

anger or for any other unjust reason, but only as the established laws for each offence dictated. (1-6)

As for *atopos* and *paradoxos*, take for instance Isocrates, who writes in the opening of his *Helen* that, “there are some who are very pleased if, after they have put forth an absurd [ἄτοπον] and paradoxical [παράδοξον] subject, they manage to speak about it passably well” (208.1.1-3).⁵

Greek also illustrates the close conceptual connection between the *thaumaston* and the *paradoxon* in the lack of distinct verbs denoting the response to the paradoxical versus the marvelous. In both cases, we typically find θαυμάζω.⁶ In Aesop’s fable “The Debtor,” one of the earliest extant occurrences of *paradoxos*, as a debtor attempts to sell a sow in the market, he tells a prospective buyer that not only will the sow produce good quality piglets, but “paradoxically” (παράδοξως; 5.1.6) she will give birth to females during the Eleusinian Mysteries (where sows are sacrificed) and males during the Panathenea (where boars are sacrificed). The creditor happens to be nearby and remarks “Don’t be surprised [θαύμαζε], for this sow will bear you baby goats at the Dionysia” (5.1.9-10). Equally, a much later author, Diogenes Laertius, writes that the Stoic sage never “marvels at anything that seems paradoxical” (θαυμάζειν τῶν δοκούντων παραδόξων; 7.123.7) such as springs of fiery water or volcanic eruptions.⁷ Of course, one may marvel at something, in the sense of *thaumazō*, for rea-

⁵ See also, e.g., Plato, *Gorg.* 482e.1; Thucydides, 3.38; and Demosthenes, *Olynth* 1 26.

⁶ Cf. the related ἐκπλήσσεσθαι (“to be struck dumb” or “to be surprised [into silence]”) as the reaction to the paradoxical: For example, in Aeschylus’ *Pers.* 290, the Persian queen is awestruck (ἐκπεπληγμένη) at news of the unexpected Persian defeat at Salamis. And in Herodotus 1.116, the monarch Astyages is surprised (ἐκπληγείσ) to recognize before him his son who he presumed dead. As evidence of the verbs similarity to *thaumazō*, cf. Herodotus 3.148, where the Spartan Cleomenes marvels and is in awe (ἀπεθώμαζέ τε καὶ ἐξεπλήσσετο) of the wealth of Maeandrius of Samos, and Plutarch, *Thes.* 19, where, on first seeing Theseus, Ariadne is struck (ἐξεπλάγη) by his beauty and marvels (ἐθαύμασε) at his athleticism. There is the rare verb παραδοξάζω, but it means “to make paradoxical/wonderful” (LSJ A), and appears only in the Septuagint.

⁷ See also Ctesias: θαυμάζειν τὸ παράδοξον (Fr. 688 F 1B.125) and Diodorus Siculus: θαυμάσαι τὸ παραδοξόν (2.4.5.6).

sons other than its paradoxicality, although as one marvels at what is in some respect extraordinary, one can see why the marvelous and the paradoxical are so closely connected.⁸ One may marvel at someone or something on account of being particularly beautiful, divine, admirable, or impressive, even as one might understand it (or not) or find nothing paradoxical about it.⁹ Equally, just as in English, *thaumazō* denotes both “wondering” in the sense of “marveling at” as well as “wondering” in the sense of “wondering about.”¹⁰ When Aristotle remarks that people began to philosophize by “wondering” (τὸ θαύμαζειν; *Met.* 982b.12-13), his focus is on the puzzlement we feel when faced with something we do not understand and on the resulting impulse to investigate.¹¹ In this way, *thaumazō* denotes both an affective reaction, marveling, to what is particularly striking for some reason and an epistemic reaction, wondering, to what we are as of yet unable to explain.

Like the verb *thaumazō*, the Greek *thaumastos/thauma* encompasses *paradoxos/paradoxon*, yet extends to broader senses of awe-inspiring. So, for example, Demosthenes admits that he too would find Philip “admirable” (θαυμαστόν; *Olyn.* 2 6.3) if he had risen to power justly.¹² Also, in the *Symposium*, Diotima describes the Form of Beauty as naturally *thaumaston* (210e.6), presumably in its ineffable and miraculous splendor that does not depend upon a particular expectation. And because *thaumastos* has a broader semantic range and denotes a marvelous nature of any sort – whether paradoxical or not – there does sometimes

⁸ For discussions of *thaumazō* in both philosophical and non-philosophical sources, mainly but not all ancient, see Irwin (2015) and Zagzebski (2015).

⁹ E.g. Priam and Achilles marvel at each other at *Il.* 24.628-32 and Leonidas is the most admired (θωμαζόμενος) of the Greek generals in Herodotus 7.204.

¹⁰ For an illuminating and wide-ranging essay on “wonder” in general as well as a discussion of these two aspects of wonder, see Hepburn (1980).

¹¹ Cf. Plato, *Tht.* 155d.

¹² See also Diodorus Siculus 1.96.3 concerning those Greeks who were admired (ἐθαυμάσθησαν) for the learning they received in Egypt; and in Plato’s “oligarchy”, men “admire and honor” (*Rep.* 553d.5) only wealth and wealthy men.

seem to be a difference in nuance between the terms (not unlike the connotations of *thaumazō*) even when referring to something paradoxical. Sometimes *thaumastos* focuses on the affective response of awe or surprise, while *paradoxos* emphasizes the epistemological facet of being contrary to belief (and hence surprising); an unsurprising feature, given the etymological roots of the words. For example, in the *Poetica* 1452a.1-11, Aristotle explicitly links the marvelous (*thaumaston*) in poetry – in this case, surprising events – to the paradoxical when he remarks that the marvelous will be more so when it occurs “as if by design” (ὥσπερ ἐπίτηδες; 1452a.7, cf. δι’ ἄλληλα; 1452a.4) and not only “contrary to expectation” (παρὰ τὴν δόξαν; 1452a.4).¹³ Yet nowhere in the *Poetica* does he talk of the *paradoxon*, likely because the import of the *thaumaston* is its ability to emotionally affect the audience through catharsis, albeit heightened by and intimately connected with the seeming intelligibility of this paradoxical wonder.¹⁴ But elsewhere, such as in the *Sophistici Elenchi* and the *Topica*, where the discussion concerns argumentation and commitments, Aristotle talks exclusively of *paradoxa*, which are views that are “contrary to beliefs” (ἐναντία ταῖς δόξαις; *Top.* 104b.4), whether received belief (cf. παράδοξος τῶν γνωρίμων; 104b.20) or some other considered belief (cf. 104b.33-36).¹⁵ Equally, Aristotle talks of paradoxes in the *Topica* concerning “witticisms” (ἄστεϊα) that turn on subverting our expectations, and he focuses on their epistemic ability to revise our beliefs and teach us something in a clever, surprising way (1412a.22-b.38). Consider also Polybius, in the opening of his history of Asia, where he writes:

¹³ On this passage, see Lucas (1968) 126 and Glanville (1947).

¹⁴ Cf. Halliwell (1998) 74-78.

¹⁵ Within these discussions, Aristotle sometimes uses ἄδοξος to label a paradoxical position that is also shameful to hold (picking up presumably on the primary meaning of ἄδοξος as “disreputable” [LSJ A.1]), e.g. at *Soph. El.* 172b.29ff. Gellius captures this nuance when he translates ἄδοξοι ὑποθέσεις as *infames* or *inopinabiles materiae* (17.11.1).

It seems marvelous [θαυμαστὸν] how the nomads cross the [large river] Oxus on foot and with horses and reach Hyrcania. There are two explanations for this event: one is reasonable [ἐπιεικής], the other paradoxical, although not impossible. (10.48.2-3)

The more likely account, Polybius suggests, describes a place where the river becomes a waterfall with enough height and power to have eroded a hollow underground passage through which it flows for some distance until emerging again, and the nomads simply cross over this underpass (7-8). The more incredible story also reports a waterfall, but this one flows so powerfully and from such a height that it blasts its waters out a full stade before the fountain again reaches earth, and the nomads wander beneath this fluid overpass (4-6). *Thaumastos* marks both the unusual overpass or underpass as awe-inspiring in their display of the raw power of nature and mankind's clever use of them, but only the particularly extraordinary, paradoxical overpass strains our credulity as we marvel at it.

In Latin, explicit terminology for the paradoxical is more diffuse than the Greek, but it retains a similar connotative nuance as *paradoxos* and *thaumastos*.¹⁶ Latin authors directly translate *paradoxos* variously as *admirabilis*, *mirabilis*, and *inopinatus*, yet *admirabilis* and *mirabilis* resemble *thaumastos* in their denotative and connotative reach, while *inopinatus* mirrors *paradoxos*. Equally, what is (a) *mirum* or a *miraculum* often pick out *paradoxa*. In reference to Stoic and Socratic paradoxes, Cicero translates *paradoxa* as *mirabilia*.¹⁷ Elsewhere, amidst Cicero's dispute with the Stoics that their counter-intuitive ideas turn simply on linguistic equivocation, Cicero objects: "Those [Stoics] call these παράδοξα, we call them *admirabilia*. Yet what is surprising, when you take a closer look [*Quid autem habent admirationis, cum prope accesseris*]?"

¹⁶ For a survey and analysis of the nature and importance of paradox in Roman literature of the early Empire, see Lefèvre (1970) and Hardie (2009b).

¹⁷ *Luc.* 136.4-5: "Indeed, most [sc. of the interlocutor's claim] are the Socratic and Stoic paradoxes [*mirabilia*], which are called παράδοξα."

(*Fin.* 4.74.6-8).¹⁸ In the *De Beneficiis*, Seneca assures Lucilius that, “In my opinion, this is the least surprising [*mirabile*] or hard to believe [*incredibile*] of the Stoic paradoxes: that he who gives freely has returned the benefit” (2.31.1.1-3). Both Seneca and, later, Quintilian equally translate *paradoxos* as *inopinatus*. Seneca, again referring to Stoic paradoxes, calls them what are “unexpected to all” (*inopinata omnibus*; *Ep.* 81.11.2), while Quintilian refers to a rhetorical technique that the Greeks call *paradoxon* as *inopinatum* (*Inst.* 9.2.23.4) and a *paradoxon* type of court case as *admirabile* (*Inst.* 4.1.40.4).¹⁹ Beyond explicit translation, we also know of a few Roman authors who followed their Greek predecessors in paradoxography, such as Varro, whose work’s transmitted title varies between *Admiranda*, *Mirabilia*, *Admirabilia*, *Gallus vel Fundanius de miris*, among others, and Cicero with his *Admiranda*.²⁰

Most of these Latin words extend in denotation beyond “paradoxical” in a similar direction as *thaumastos*. *Admirabilis* frequently means “admirable” with its positive evaluative and ethical implications.²¹ And *mirabilis*, *admirabilis*, and *mirus* may mean “marvelous” as a result of some particularly exceptional quality, which need not require paradoxicality.²² For Seneca, the cosmos is marvelous (*mirabilis*; *Marc.* 18.4.3) and awesome (a *miraculum*; *N.Q.* 6.4.2) precisely because it is rationally ordered and unparadoxical.²³ Uniquely, the less frequent *inopinatus* does seem to always capture the idea of paradoxicality, as we might expect

¹⁸ Cf. *Fin.* 61, where imagined Academics rebuke Cato for siding with the Stoic Zeno, who, according to the Academics, simply changed their own views by adding new terminology, “which at first appearance surprises, but once the matter is explained, causes laughter” (*quae prima specie admirationem, re explicate risum moverent*; 9-10).

¹⁹ See a similar list of types of court cases with *admirabile* in Cicero’s *Inv. Rhet.* 1.20. Cf. Fronto, *Eloq.* 3.6, where *inopinatus* translates the Greek *paradoxos*. The rare word *inopinabilis* appears in Latin post-Seneca, primarily in Gellius, who uses it in the same way as Aristotle uses *adoxos*, viz. as “paradoxical” but with a negative connotation. See, Gellius 11.18.11, 17.9.18, and 17.12.1.

²⁰ On these Latin paradoxographical works, see Schepens and Delcroix (1996) 428-430.

²¹ E.g. Cicero, *Orat.* 1.6 and *Off.* 2.48; Livy, 22.37.3; Seneca, *Ep.* 111.3; and Tacitus, *Dial.* 30.5.

²² For (*ad*)*mirabilis*, see, e.g., Cicero, *Orat.* 1.259; Cornelius Nepos, *Milt.* 5.1; Vergil, *Aen.* 1.652; and Ovid, *Met.* 6.14. For *mirus*, see, e.g., Cicero, *Fam.* 2.11.11; Plautus, *Ps.* 1.5.97; and Pliny, *HN* 2.248.1.

²³ Cf. *Prov.* 1 and Section II.

from a calque of *paradoxos*.²⁴ Yet, similar to the Greek, Latin authors often seem to favor *(ad)mirabilis* for emphasis on the affective response of surprise in the face of the paradoxical and *inopinatus* to bring out its doxastic contrariety. Cicero covers both bases when, in his *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, he contends that the Stoic paradox that the non-wise are slaves is “not as counter-intuitive [*inopinatum*] or surprising [*mirabile*] in substance [*re*] as it is in speech [*dictu*]” (5.35.4-5).²⁵ Cicero depicts the affective emphasis when he writes that Stoic paradoxes move us first to surprise (*admiratio*; 10), then laughter (*risus*; 10) (*Fin.* 61.9-10).²⁶ Seneca relates the *inopinatum* to the “novel” (*novum*) since, for those who do not recognize the limitations of their knowledge and thus expect nothing to occur that they have not already experienced, anything never seen before strikes them as paradoxical.²⁷ Relatedly, Seneca’s dual description at *Ben.* 2.31.1.1-3 (quoted above) of Stoic paradoxes as both “surprising” (*mirabile*) and “hard to believe” (*incredibile*) resembles Cicero’s description, albeit with *incredibile* replacing *inopinatum*. Still, though, despite the epistemic focus, the resulting surprise remains intimately tied to the idea of the *inopinatum*, for in the face of the *inopinatum*, “the eyes of the inexperienced are struck with amazement [*feriuntur*], marveling [*mirantium*] at all these unexpected things [*omnia subita*] since they do not know their causes” (*Ep.* 88.22.7-8). In fact, Quintilian nicely illustrates the interrelation of these two facets of paradox (to which we will return) together with

²⁴ Both Gellius (2.19.4) and Fronto (*Ad M. Caes.* 4.3.3.21) gloss *inopinatus* as *praeter opinionem*. Consider the words often used in combination with *inopinatus* that get at ideas close to but distinct from strict paradoxicality: *novum*, “novel” (used together with *inopinatus* at Seneca, *Ep.* 88.22; Cicero, *Tusc.* 5.81.7; Livy 6.40.3), *improvisus*, “unforeseen” (with *inopinatus* at Cicero, *Verr.* 2.2.69 and Livy 27.43.7), or *insperatus*, “un-hoped for” or “unexpected [with a negative connotation]” (with *inopinatus* at Livy 3.26.5; Gellius 2.19.4; Fronto, *Ad M. Caes.* 4.3.3.21).

²⁵ Citing this, Moretti (1995) 159-189 overgeneralizes in taking Stoic *paradoxa* as purely formal and linguistic. Still, she offers a useful discussion of this side of Stoic paradox.

²⁶ Cf. Cicero, *Part.* 22.1-4, where some “unseen or unheard of or new” (*invisum aut inauditum aut novum*; 2-3) expression is pleasingly “surprising” (*admirabile*, 4).

²⁷ See, e.g., *Ep.* 76.34 and 88.22. See also Fronto, *Elog.* 3.7 and Cicero, *Tusc.* 4.38.1 and 5.81.7. Cf. Livy’s description at 26.4.6-8 of the innovative Capuan battle maneuver in which light infantry precede cavalry. While the maneuver wounded the enemy, the greatest benefit lay in the fear it instilled in the enemy, shaken by the novel and unexpected (*ex re nova atque inopinata*; 8.3).

the natural emphases of *(ad)mirabilis* vs. *inopinatus*. On one hand, he describes a “*paradoxon*” type of case, in which the orator must make up for the fact that his case or some salient feature of it (negatively) surprises and thus unsettles the court (4.1.41).²⁸ Quintilian calls such a case *admirabile* and captures the affective facet, but when he explains that it is *admirabile* “because it stands contrary to the belief of men (*praeter opinionem hominum*)” (4.1.41.1-2), he links being *admirabile qua* paradoxical with being *inopinatum*. On the other hand, elsewhere, Quintilian discusses a rhetorical technique called a *paradoxon*, where an orator deliberately builds suspense and a certain expectation only to subvert it to the listener’s surprise (9.2.23). He translates this maneuver as an *inopinatum* (9.2.23.6), and while this emphasizes the epistemic facet, the passage focuses on the affective effects (cf. *diu suspendisset iudicum animos*; 22.5), with the result that this rhetorical *inopinatum* as such leads to *admiratio*.²⁹

The Latin verbs *mirari* and *admirari* play the same sort of multiple roles that the Greek *thaumazō* plays. *(Ad)mirari* marks the act of marveling at what amazes either because of its surprising peculiarity, novelty, or paradoxicality or on account of its exemplarity in some quality. Seneca identifies two distinct reactions when, in *Ep.* 81.12, he remarks that someone is surprised (*admiratur*; 1) at the Stoic paradoxes that only the sage knows how to love and that only the sage is a friend, but, in *Ep.* 31.4, he writes that if he saw a man laboring towards the right things, he would admire (*admirabor*; 4) and encourage him.³⁰ No doubt influenced by similar sentiments in Greek philosophy, some Latin authors add an ethical di-

²⁸ Quintilian doesn’t expressly define the different categories of cases (cf. Cicero, *Inv. Rhet.* 1.20.9-10), but in the following discussion at §49, he does refer to what would likely be a “paradoxical” case. In Cicero’s prosecution of Verres, the jury was surprised (*mirari*, 4) that despite Cicero’s traditional services in defense, he now prosecuted, and hence Cicero mollified the surprise by depicting his prosecution as a defense of his friends. Cicero defines the *admirabile* case as one “against which the mind of those about to hear it has been estranged” (*a quo est alienatus animus eorum qui audituri sunt*; *Inv. Rhet.* 1.20.9-10).

²⁹ Quintilian’s entire discussion of these rhetorical devices in Book Nine concerns their ability to manipulate the emotions of the court.

³⁰ For admiring, cf. Terence, *Eu.* 250; Cicero, *Orat.* 1.219; Vergil, *G.* 4.215; and Livy 1.1.8. For surprise and wondering, cf. Plautus, *Am.* 116; Caesar, *Civ.* 3.86.2; Propertius 2.17.7; Cicero, *Tusc.* 3.30;

mension to marveling.³¹ Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, in the words of Philip Hardie, "lead[s] us from uncomprehending wonder at the marvels of the universe to a rational understanding of the principles that underlie all reality".³² As in Aristotle, Lucretian awe comes from a place of inexperience and misunderstanding (cf. *caeca ratione*; 6.67) and is dispelled by reason (*vera ratio*; e.g. 1.51).³³ Those who *admirantur* do so out of ignorance: fools marvel at and admire Heraclitus' paradoxical claims merely because they are expressed "hidden beneath ambiguous words" (*inversis... sub verbis latitantia*; 1.642), and men are in excessive (*nimis*; 6.850) awe over a spring near the shrine of Ammon for reasons far from the truth (*a verast longe ratione remotum*; 853). Yet together with this uncomprehending wonder comes an unsettling fear of the unknown.³⁴ In book 6, Lucretius reminds his reader that mere unfamiliarity breeds amazement, which fades simply with time, and illustrates this principle with the proposed awe someone would feel if faced for the first time with the heavens (1026-1040). Thus, Lucretius commends, we should not be fearful of the novelty of Epicureanism itself and "spit out reason from our mind" (*expuere ex animo rationem*; 1041), but rather bravely gauge its truth with an open, discerning mind (*acri iudicio*; 1040-1041).

We see a more expansive version of this sentiment in Horace's *Epistle* 6 in his first book of letters.³⁵ Horace identifies the root of happiness with the ability to never marvel (*nil admirari*; 1). Tranquility cannot coexist with an attitude that regards the unexpected, welcome or not, with a rush of adrenaline:

³¹ Cf., e.g., Pythagoras' maxim μηδὲν θαυμάζειν (Plutarch, *Moral.* 44B). On the thinking behind such a maxim, see Irwin (2015) 239-244.

³² Hardie (2009b) 7. On this approach in Lucretius, see Conte (1994) 18-32, De Lacy (1964), and Hardie (2009a).

³³ Cf. Lucretius' use of *mirari* at 5.84 to describe those who wonder about the workings of astronomy and meteorology (see also 6.608).

³⁴ On this, see Conte (1994) 22-23.

³⁵ On this letter in general, see Mayer (1994) 143-157.

He who fears what is opposite [*adversa*] to these [goods like gifts, fame, etc.] marvels [*miratur*] in basically the same way as he who desires them. Excitement [*pavor*] stirs up both. An unforeseen [*improvisa*] sight equally shakes both. Whether man rejoices or despairs, whether he feels desire or fear, what is the difference, if upon seeing something better or worse than he expected, he is stupefied [*torpet*] in body and mind and cannot tear his eyes away [*defixis oculis*]? (9-14)

Of interest for us is Horace's focus on the ethically problematic affective and evaluative component of *admirari*. He passes quickly from the Lucretian fear of an incomprehensible nature (cf. 3-5: "There are some who watch without fear the sun and stars and the passing seasons in their steady movements.") to the tumultuous and myopic stimulation by the more mundane, although still relatively exotic (cf. *Arabas... Indos... Tyrios*, 6 and 18).³⁶ In fact, he makes the epistemic underpinnings of the fearful awe at inexplicable natural phenomena exculpatory when he pointedly asks how we should respond to earthly munificence (8) if men can respond calmly to more awesome elements of the cosmos. Horace does causally link *admirari* with surprise at the unexpected and paradoxical (cf. *improvisa* and *melius peiusve sua spe*; 11 and 13).³⁷ But he equally relates the affective response of awe to the underlying excessive evaluation of what we commonly marvel at: "Go now, stare at old silver and marble and bronze and works of art, marvel [*mirare*] at Tyrian colors together with gems" (17-18). In his philosophical exhortation, Horace draws together the different senses of (*ad*)*mirari*, both the act of marveling at the unexpected and unexplained and admiring what one deems extraordinary.

³⁶ Cf. Mayer (1994) 144.

³⁷ Mayer (1994) 146 suggests "prose prefers *opinione*" in place of *spe*, but that Horace borrows the metrically possible *spe* from Sallust and Livy.

III: The Nature of Paradox

We have already begun parsing out the concept of paradox within our discussion of terminology, but it is a subtle enough idea to require further examination. The notion of a “paradox” has as nearly as broad a purview in Greek and Latin as it has in English.³⁸ The Greek adjective παράδοξος literally means “contrary to [παρά] belief or expectation [δόξα]”, a meaning which the various equivalent Latin terms, especially *inopinatus*, equally convey. “Paradoxical” marks something, whether a word, claim, idea, state of affairs, or physical object, as surprising, counter-intuitive, or remarkable to the point of disbelief.³⁹ Standardly, a paradox runs contrary to either a received belief, hence Melissus’ paradoxical claim that “being is one” contradicts most everyone’s belief in nature’s multiplicity,⁴⁰ or a considered, rea-

³⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary defines a paradox as (1a) “a statement or tenet contrary to received opinion or belief, *esp.* one that is difficult to believe”, (1b) “a figure of speech consisting of a conclusion or apodosis contrary to what the audience has been led to expect”, (2a) “an apparently absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition, or a strongly counter-intuitive one, which investigation, analysis, or explanation may nevertheless prove to be well-founded or true”, (2b) “a proposition or statement that is (taken to be) actually self-contradictory, absurd, or intrinsically unreasonable”, in addition to (5) “a person or thing whose life or behavior is characterized by paradox; a paradoxical phenomenon or occurrence, *spec.* one that exhibits some contradiction or conflict with preconceived notions of what is reasonable or possible.” For modern views on the paradoxical, see Quine (1966), Lycan (2010), Sainsbury (1988), Orlandini (2003), and Clark (2012).

³⁹ Paradoxical arguments illustrate one significant difference between the modern and ancient terminology of paradox. Modern scholars standardly call certain ancient logical conundrums “paradoxes,” such as the famous Sorites Paradox or the Liar’s Paradox (called “paradoxes,” among other terms, in, e.g., Garcea (2003), Mignucci, Bobzien, and Barnes (1999) 157-176, Barnes (1997a), Atherton (1993), Schofield (1983), and Papazien (2012)). This is justifiable in the ancient sense of the word insofar as they appear innocuous but seem to logically lead to paradox: for the former, that, e.g., a pile of 10 grains of sand is a heap, while a pile of 9 is not, and for the latter, that someone who lies, saying “I am a liar”, tells the truth. But the vast majority of ancient texts call these “fallacies” and “sophisms” (σοφίσματα or *cavillationes*; e.g. Sextus Empiricus, *PH* 2.229 and Seneca, *Ep.* 45.5.2, respectively), not *paradoxa* (in my searches, only Lucian in *Auct.* 22 terms them παράδοξα). This ancient terminological preference probably stems from the conceptualization of these conundrums. Sextus Empiricus gives the Stoic definition of a sophism as “an argument that is persuasive and deceitfully framed such that one accepts a false or seemingly false or unclear or otherwise unacceptable conclusion” (*PH* 2.220). Despite their paradoxical results, to the ancient mind they mark most essentially some faulty or careless reasoning. Philosophers considered them not as evidence for some paradoxical claim, but rather as clever inducements to flawed trains of thoughts that lead to absurd results. As such, they offered philosophers both training and fodder for uncovering truths about logic and language. On these sophisms, see, e.g., Garcea (2003), Barnes (1982), Mignucci et al. (1999) 157-176, Atherton (1993) 407-457, and Bobzien (2005). For an additional, albeit slightly dated, bibliography, see Atherton (1993) 408 ft. 1.

⁴⁰ Both Aristotle (*Top.* 104b.21-23) and Isocrates (*Helen* 208.1-3) use Melissus’ position as an example of a paradox. Such paradoxical claims need not be well reasoned, although patently absurd paradoxes are of little interest to ancient authors and are not typically called *paradoxa*. Aristotle suggests that we should not concern our-

sonable belief, such that Polybius calls Hamilcar’s attack on a bridge near Utica paradoxical to the Uticans because they had no reason to believe the attack possible (1.75.6-10).⁴¹ Moreover, as we have seen, paradoxes often invoke a sense of awe, a marveling elicited by something amazing and unexpected. Yet a paradox does not simply surprise or inspire awe. Paradoxes may cause these affective responses, that mental jolt of surprise or that awestruck enrancement, but *why* it has these capacities makes it paradoxical.

Paradoxes do not fit coherently within an ordinary or considered worldview.⁴² They are or at least at first appear to be contrary to the expectations our worldviews determine – what we deem reasonable, acceptable, or consistent. Thus, on the one hand, for example, the sudden backfiring of a car’s engine on a busy street may surprise us when we don’t expect it, but this sound is not paradoxical, for we can readily make sense of it with what we know about cars and, broadly speaking, the sorts of things that happen in a world with cars. In this case, the surprise arises as a physiological response, a natural reflex to unexpected, striking stimuli that are nonetheless in their content readily expectable and explainable. According to Seneca, even the sage, to whom nothing paradoxical (*inopinatum*) occurs (*V.B.* 8.6.3), still naturally and unavoidably reacts to something sudden (*inhorrescet ad subita*; *Ep.* 57.4.4).⁴³ However, on the other hand, stumbling upon a river that flows uphill will also surprise us,

selves with paradoxical claims espoused by any random person, only those by philosophers (*Top.* 104b.23-25; cf. *Eud. Eth.* 1214b.28-32).

⁴¹ Cf. Aristotle, *Top.* 104b.11-36.

⁴² By “worldview” I mean the system of concepts, the commitments formed through the use of these concepts, and the logical connections between these concepts and commitments, all of which determine how we perceive, experience, and think about the world. This sense of “worldview” includes, then, elements of both the *weltansicht* of Wilhelm von Humboldt (influenced by Kant), which refers to the conceptual apparatus contained in a language through which we consider the nature of the world, and the more common *weltanschauung*, referring to a particle perspective, system of beliefs, or even “ideology” affirming a specific understanding of the nature of the world, and so a worldview held by a particular or more commonly a group of likeminded individuals whether within the same linguistic context or not. For a disambiguation between these two concepts, see Underhill (2009).

⁴³ Cf. the “tremulous awe” (*horror*) that seizes Lucretius upon seeing nature laid bare before him by Epicurean revelation (3.28). On these involuntary responses in Senecan thought, see Inwood (1993).

but this paradoxical river violates an expectation of a different order.⁴⁴ We don't expect a car to backfire because we aren't thinking about it. We do not have any settled expectation one way or the other, presumably because we have no compelling reasons for such expectations.⁴⁵ We know of the possibility of hearing a car backfire when near cars, but we don't constantly brace ourselves for such an event. But a river flowing uphill contradicts a particular expectation, viz. what we think possible.⁴⁶ Rivers simply do not flow uphill. According to our worldview, such a river not only does not exist, but also violates certain principles governing the world's workings. It doesn't make sense.⁴⁷ Paradoxicality often exhibits this sort of contradiction, and in this way paradoxes are or at least risk being *atopon*, *apiston*, or *incredible*.

Yet we need not think that paradoxicality requires so complete a contradiction as that of an uphill-flowing river. We may readily acknowledge the existence of something paradoxical, but it remains paradoxical so long as it is in some way ill fitted to our worldview.⁴⁸ In the preface of Book 7 of the *Natural Questions*, Seneca condemns our inability to admire any celestial body or feature other than those that are paradoxical, such as solar and lunar eclipses and comets. Whatever is "some new marvel" (*novum aliquod... miraculum*; 1.3), "unusual" (*insolitum*; 1.8), "out of the ordinary" (*ex more*; 2.3), or "unexpected" (*praeter consuetudi-*

⁴⁴ Unusual bodies of water and their activities were favorite ancient *paradoxa*. See, e.g., Photios' list in *Bibl.* 145b.12 of the conventional topics of paradoxographies: ζῷα, φυτά, χῶραι, ποταμοί, χρῆναι, βοτάναι with the discussion of paradoxographic themes in Schepens and Delcroix (1996).

⁴⁵ When a car's backfire surprises someone and they remark, "I didn't expect that," usually this means that they were not actively expecting to hear that loud noise, rather than that they are surprised because they had reason to expect *not* to hear that loud noise.

⁴⁶ Thus a car's backfire may be paradoxical, if, e.g., it occurs in a brand new car, which one would then reasonably expect to be highly unlikely to backfire.

⁴⁷ Were such an uphill-flowing river physically possible, the Stoic sage would not find it paradoxical, since, given various Stoic tenets, he would never have committed himself to the impossibility of such rivers.

⁴⁸ The genre of paradoxography rests on this fact, since paradoxographers sought to make such *paradoxa* believable enough in order to elicit the sought-after awe rather than incredulous disdain (Schepens and Delcroix (1996) 386-389).

nem; 4.3) catches our attention and incites our curiosity, since “it is natural to marvel more at the novel than the great” (*naturale est magis nova quam magna mirari*; 3.4-5). Average Romans would have likely known that such *miracula* exist and sometimes occur, so their initial surprise in sighting one of them in the sky resembles the reaction to a car’s backfire. But this does not interest Seneca here. These Romans are not simply surprised that a comet has appeared. They marvel at the comet itself, wondering about it – hence the curiosity (cf. *nemo non scire quid sit cupit*; 5.2)⁴⁹ – as something that does not fit within their worldview. This paradoxical ball of fire that seems to appear randomly and to have an unpredictable trajectory has no rational place in an ordered or at least predictable cosmos (cf. *haec tamen non adnotamus, quamdiu ordo servatur*; 4.1-2). Indeed Seneca aims to show that comets are not paradoxical in this way at all and are not “unordinary celestial bodies” (*non ordinarium sidus*; 30.2.4) or “chance fires” (*fortuitos ignes*; 8-9) but are “interwoven into the cosmos” (*intextos mundo*; 10).⁵⁰ In their ignorance, Romans may know comets exist, but their paradoxical nature contradicts the Romans’ expectations stemming from their faulty or incomplete understanding of nature.

Seneca’s discussion of the paradoxicality of comets implies a distinction between what is paradoxical and what is simply unknown. The Roman reader of the *Natural Questions* likely has much to learn about comets. Perhaps beyond his knowledge of their existence and

⁴⁹ The question is not whether it is a comet (i.e. whether comets exist), but rather what a comet is (5.6-7).

⁵⁰ Williams (2012) 275-276 suggests that Seneca positions comets amidst the ordered heavens (explicitly *contra* Stoic [Posidonian] orthodoxy at 7.22.1) as part of an experimental “conceptual hierarchy of a quasi-Platonic stamp,” which aligns the movement from the transitory *sublimia* to the constant and ordered *caelestia* with the epistemic transition from mere uncertain belief (*doxa*) to real knowledge (*epistēmē*). Without any disagreement, we might also see Seneca’s rejection of the traditional Stoic account of comets as a reflection not only of the philo-artistic impulse in the *N.Q.* described by Williams but also Seneca’s commitment to a perfectly coherent cosmos in which paradoxical comets do not or even cannot figure. Williams (2012) 288 in fact hints at such a motive: “From a Senecan standpoint, Posidonius is doubly misguided: beyond subscribing to an atmospheric theory of comets, he here reveals, or is accorded, an interest in *miracula* [7.20.2] that loosely aligns him with the *historici* of 7.16; for both have an eye for the marvelous that is countered by Seneca’s emphasis in 7.1 on regularity in nature, not exceptionality.” This commitment plays an especially integral part in Williams’ arguments concerning Book Six of the *N.Q.* (219-225).

a rough idea of what they look like and how they act, the reader is mostly ignorant of the nature of comets. But this is not why they are paradoxical to the Roman viewer, at least not directly. As we have seen, their paradoxicality rests in a comet's violation of the viewer's expectations of a certain cosmic order. While something that is unknown or not understood by an individual may be paradoxical to them, it need not be. Consider the Roman who has come to understand comets such that they are no longer paradoxical. Should a new comet appear in the sky, one that he has never seen before, many of its features may be unknown and not yet understood by him. But so long as this unknown comet doesn't contradict any of his expectations about comets, it will not be paradoxical, simply unknown and likely marvelous. Thus, he may come to learn new things – the comet's unique but comprehensible appearance, trajectory, etc. – without these new things being necessarily paradoxical.⁵¹

In addition, paradoxicality can apply to states of affairs that involve an even weaker sense of contradiction or impossibility in which some event, technically conceivable given one's worldview, nonetheless contradicts expectations derived from that worldview. Polybius focuses heavily on this sort of paradox.⁵² For instance, in Book 1 of his histories, Polybius recounts the Carthaginian general Adherbal's surprise at the paradoxical arrival (τὸ παράδοξον; 49.7.3) of a Roman fleet under Publius Claudius Pulcher.⁵³ Pulcher caught Adherbal by surprise due to Adherbal's ignorance of the true state of affairs, not because of any inattention or absent-mindedness on Adherbal's part. Adherbal believed that, due to large

⁵¹ Consider a more extensive example: a young teenager may know little about the study of Algebra, but he also likely doesn't have beliefs that contradict Algebraic tenets. In studying Algebra, he will learn a great deal about something he knew little of before, but (conceivably) nothing he learns will initially strike him as paradoxical.

⁵² A fact that Polybius highlights in the opening of his histories, where he remarks that the paradoxicality of the events in his histories will motivate his readers to continue reading (1.4).

⁵³ See also, e.g., a similar plan for an unexpected arrival by sea at 5.109, the Carthaginians hope for a nevertheless unexpected success (παράδοξους ἐλπίδας) over Rome in 3.2, and the plan for a *paradoxotatē* fire set by Scipio in the Carthaginian camp at 14.1, in contrast to the discussion of philosophical *paradoxa* at 12.26d.

Roman casualties in the nearby siege of Lilybaeum, Rome could not man such a fleet, as he was unaware that Rome had recently sent reinforcements (49.1-4). Unlike the up-hill flowing river or comet, the Roman attack does not contradict any fundamental commitments of Adherbal's worldview. Fleets can be replenished and surprise attacks can occur, and Roman reinforcements were at least conceivable. But given no evidence of reinforcements and presumably the assumption that a general wouldn't attack with insufficient forces, Adherbal understandably believed and expected that the Romans would not attack, rendering the event paradoxical to him.

Thus far, I have spoken in terms of concrete paradoxes, i.e. paradoxical objects or events, but paradoxicality in language works in a similar way. And it also shows more clearly how even while paradoxes contradict our worldview, they still either are or at least seem possibly capable of integration within it. Our worldview consists in an intricate framework and interrelated nexus of concepts.⁵⁴ These concepts are fundamentally linguistic, for we think and interpret the world via symbolic language and reasoning. In this way our worldviews shape the meaning of our language and vice versa.⁵⁵ To any given worldview, there is a correlative linguistic system. Thus, paradoxical statements of strict logical contradiction such as Heraclitus' remark that "the way up and down are one and the same" (quoted in Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.10.4) surprise us when proclaimed sincerely because they make no sense in the linguistic system that corresponds to our worldview, where "up" and "down" are mutually exclusive.⁵⁶ On its own in relation to most people's worldviews, this statement cannot be

⁵⁴ On the Stoic notion of conceptions (ἔννοιαι or προλήψεις), see Brittain (2005), Dyson (2009), Frede (1987) and (1999b), and Vogt (2008) 165-168.

⁵⁵ For a survey of modern discussions on the intimate relationship between language and worldview, see Underhill (2009) and (2011) and Naugle (2002).

⁵⁶ Cf. Heraclitus' claims: "The path of the cardings wheels is straight and crooked" (γνάφων ὁδὸς εὐθεῖα καὶ σκολιή; quoted in Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.10.4, trans. Kahn). On this claim, see Kahn (1979) 190-193.

sensibly explained. Hearing this as a potentially meaningful statement is the equivalent of seeing an uphill-flowing river.⁵⁷ Yet “up is down” has the appearance of possible validity, whether actual or not – it is not gibberish, and it makes syntactical sense. With the right frame of reference or conceptual refinement, resolution or understanding is conceivable.⁵⁸ Linguistic paradoxes at least appear meaningful even as they resist meaningfulness. Just as a car’s backfiring fails to be paradoxical simply because it occurs unexpectedly, linguistic paradoxicality encompasses more than mere surprise. We do not expect pure nonsense to be interjected into a text, but it is not, by definition, potentially meaningful and hence not paradoxical. One cannot hope to resolve nonsense, at least not in the same way as one resolves a paradox.⁵⁹

Like concrete paradoxes, linguistic paradoxes need not be so intrinsically contradictory. First, many of the more famous paradoxical statements in ancient thought were not internally contradictory. Internal contradiction makes a claim paradoxical not because of the internal contradiction *per se* but because such a claim violates our deeply held belief in the Law of Non-Contradiction (i.e. something cannot be both X and not-X at the same time, in the same way, and in the same respect). Many ancient thinkers’ claims, such as “all is in flux”, or “speaking a falsehood is impossible”, or “the virtues are one in the same”, lack contradiction within themselves but are still labeled as *paradoxa*, as they contradict commonly-

⁵⁷ Of course, linguistic paradoxes can be ruled false or truly nonsensical, whereas, assuming one is in a sober and sane state of mind, an uphill-flowing river cannot be waved away, but this is a feature of the fictive powers of language rather than paradoxicality *per se*.

⁵⁸ For suggestions of a resolution for Heraclitus’ claim, see Kahn (1979) 240-241. On resolution as an aim of Heraclitean paradox in general, see Mackenzie (1988) *contra* Burnyeat (1982) now with McCabe (2015).

⁵⁹ So, for example, one might “resolve” nonsense by deciphering it, if, e.g., what appears to be nonsense is rather encrypted text, or by explaining its presence, if, e.g., it represents the authorial persona’s lapse into delirium.

held beliefs.⁶⁰ Second, someone may use a word paradoxically, when it contradicts our logical, grammatical, or semantic expectations. This can be in an absolute sense, such as when Plato's Socrates remarks that calling the making of thread "weaving" is using "a paradoxical and false name" (*Plt.* 281a.13-b.1), or in a relative sense in a given context. In the *Rhetorica*, Aristotle discusses certain "witticisms" (ἄστεϊα, 1412a.23) that are *paradoxa* and subvert our expectations, such as clever riddles and jokes that turn on a change in word or letter (1412a.22-1412b).⁶¹ He offers as an example the line of verse ἔστειχε δ' ἔχων ὑπὸ ποσσὶ χίμεθλα ("and he continued, having beneath his feet inflammation"), which substitutes the unexpected χίμεθλα ("chilblain" [an itchy inflammation of skin]) for the expected πέδιλα ("sandals") (1412a.40-41). Aristotle equally includes witticisms that turn on the unexpected alteration of a word's meaning.⁶² He cites Isocrates' remark that "empire [ἀρχήν] was the beginning [ἀρχήν] of the city's troubles" (1412b.5-6), which is cleverly meaningful only after we move beyond the initial expected identity in meaning between the two uses of ἀρχή.⁶³ These witticisms do not turn on any unrecognizable or nonsensical use of words, but still they have their effect because they set up a particular expectation based on a reasonable train of thought, only to upend it, and thus count as paradoxical.⁶⁴ In line with Aristotle's "witticisms", many modes and figures of speech qualify as paradoxical. In his *Topica* §45, Cicero

⁶⁰ Isocrates (*Helen* 208.1-3) calls the first two *paradoxa* (on the second claim, cf. Plato's *Euthydemus*), seconded on the first by Aristotle (*Top.* 104b.21-23). The last was a famous paradox put forward by Socrates and then the Stoics (noted as such by Cicero, *Luc.* 136.5). On such *paradoxa*, cf. Aristotle on enythematic *paradoxa* (*Rhet.* 1394b.9-10).

⁶¹ Cf. Cicero's similar discussion of witticisms (*facetiae*) at *Orat.* 2.253-260 that arise when "we expect to hear one thing, yet hear something else" (255.2-3; cf. 260.9-12 and 284.2-3), and which invoke both surprise (*admiration*; 254.6) and laughter.

⁶² Cf. Cicero, *Orat.* 2.261-262.

⁶³ Cf. Horace, *Ep.* 1.1.106-108: "In conclusion: the sage is unequal to Jove alone – wealthy, free, honored, handsome, indeed a king of kings, and, in particular, sane [*sanus*, equally "healthy"], except when he is bothered by a cold."

⁶⁴ Cf. Cicero's and Quintilian's discussion of rhetorical *paradoxa* above.

allows the use of “paradoxical [modes of argument]” (*mirabilia*; 12) to philosophers and orators. Here he specifically describes hyperbole (ὑπερβολή; 12) and counts as examples narratives of the speech of the unspeaking (*muta*; 9), the dead rising from the underworld, and the occurrence of the impossible, all of which, as hyperbole, give or take force from the matter at hand.

IV: Paradox resolution

Lastly, the concept of paradoxicality encompasses (1) what is substantively paradoxical, which does in fact contradict either received or considered belief, (2) what is to varying degrees superficially paradoxical, which appears counter-intuitive at first but upon closer inspection of both the paradox and one’s current beliefs reveals itself otherwise, and (3) what is both in different respects. And these types of paradox correlate with the different ways one can resolve paradoxes, that is, understand them such that they are no longer paradoxical. However, we may not resolve a paradox at all. As many ancient thinkers did, we might simply reject as false, say, Heraclitus’ paradoxical claim that everything is in flux.⁶⁵ We can understand its claim even as we deny that it reflects reality. In a different sense, a paradox can remain nominally paradoxical despite resolution. Paradoxes such as those made by Socrates and the Stoics retained the name *paradoxa* even to those who accepted them as true. As we have seen, *paradoxos* and its Latin equivalents commonly mean “contrary to *received* belief”, a qualification that resolution does not remove.⁶⁶

Assuming the possibility of resolution, a paradox resolves in two ways. On the one hand, in the face of the substantively paradoxical, we might alter our worldview, substituting

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Plato’s rejection of “radical” Heraclitean flux (*Tht.* 153-161).

⁶⁶ Cf. Cicero’s *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, where he offers arguments in their favor.

one or more beliefs for another that was previously contradictory or incompatible, and perhaps add to it, with the result that what was previously incongruous becomes integrated, reasonable, and explainable. This process may be so simple as to strain the notion of “resolution”. In the Polybius passage above, the Romans’ attack against Adherbal is at first paradoxical to him, but ceases to be paradoxical when he recognizes his error in believing that there were no Roman reinforcements and hence no chance of a Roman incursion.⁶⁷ But the process may equally involve either a profound or multifaceted alteration of a worldview or the addition of a number of new beliefs, or both. Consider Seneca’s discussion of stage machinery, paradoxical to the eyes of the unknowledgeable, as it spontaneously falls apart or reassembles (*Ep.* 88.22). While the suddenness of the event (*subita*; 7) plays a part in the spectators’ surprise, they find it paradoxical because they cannot make sense of it (cf. *quia causas non novere mirantium*; 7-8). They lose that sense of awe with understanding, i.e. a new complex of beliefs on mechanics, physics, and craftsmanship and a revision or rejection of some previous commitments concerning the capabilities of machines. In the *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius bids us readers to fundamentally realign our worldviews in accordance with the paradoxical Epicureanism (cf. *rerum novitatem*; 1.139). Given the depth of revision required to integrate the essential Epicurean paradox – for the ancients – that everything consists of atoms, Lucretius understandably peppers his poem with a favorite refrain, “[it is] no wonder” (*non mirum*), that is, “it should not be surprising or paradoxical,” emphasizing the process of rational resolution and reassuring his readers.⁶⁸ At 2.80, Lucretius continues to explain the paradoxical claim that atoms are unceasingly moving through the void and notes that when they

⁶⁷ It may of course remain nominally paradoxical as something a reasonable person would not have expected. Cf. also the witticisms in Cicero’s *Orat.* 2.255 and 284 that rest only on its unexpectedness (as opposed to, say, also verbal equivocation). We make sense of such a paradoxical joke simply by recognizing that we expected the wrong punch line or no punch line at all.

⁶⁸ See also, e.g., 4.768, 4.814, 5.192, 5.799, 6.130.

often collide, they fly off in different directions, yet “no wonder [*neque enim mirum*], since they are utterly hard with a solid weight [*durissima... ponderibus solidus*] and nothing stands behind them in their way” (87-88). He forestalls any disbelief by reminding us (cf. 1.565-576) of atomic qualities that we have presumably already come to accept and anchors his arguments in these beliefs as he builds in his reader an acceptance of Epicurean atomism.

On the other hand, in the face of the superficially paradoxical, resolution comes through recognizing (1) that the paradoxical ceases to be paradoxical when reinterpreted and/or (2) that what appears paradoxical at first in fact does not contradict our worldview. Some of the humorous witticisms discussed by Aristotle in the *Rhetorica* 1412a-b and Cicero in the *De Oratore* 2.253-260 derive their force from their paradoxicality, but both authors are clear that these witticisms must be readily understandable – there must be an “aha” moment.⁶⁹ The joke is lost if the reader or listener can’t quickly make sense of, e.g., a play on words or a clever inversion of expected meaning. We laugh when we reinterpret what is at first paradoxical into something readily sensible and recognize the clever manipulation behind the paradoxicality. In a more serious vein, given the many paradoxical claims of Epicurean physics, it is little surprise that Lucretius deftly highlights those new details that aren’t actually counter-intuitive.⁷⁰ For instance, after he explains the nature of atoms’ perpetual motion, Lucretius calms his reader:

The following point in these matters is not paradoxical [*mirabile*]: why [*quare*], although all atoms [*rerum primordia*] are in motion, nevertheless the whole [*summa*] seems to rest in total quiet, except when something moves with its own body. In fact, the nature of atoms lies altogether deep, far from all our senses. Thus, since you are unable now to discern those very things, they must also steal away their motion, especially given how those things that we are able to discern often still hide their motions while far off at a distance. (2.308-316)

⁶⁹ Aristotle, *Rhet.* 1412a.39-1412b.2. In Cicero’s words, we must recognize our own error (*Orat.* 2.260).

⁷⁰ See, e.g., 2.338, 2.465, 4.256, 4.768, 4.814, and 5.666.

He goes on to remind us how grazing sheep or a battle look static at enough distance, presented as more readily recognizable analogies to atomic movement (317-332). Although we might initially balk, thinking, for example, that invisible atomic motion violates our belief that motion is perceivable, Lucretius points out that our worldview already recognizes the relativity of motion's perceptibility such that movement can look static, and we simply need to integrate atomic motion with this in mind. Indeed his ingenious examples demonstrate both this experience of relativity and the relationship between the size of the moving objects and the distance at which they appear static: meandering sheep appear motionless merely "at a distance" (*longe*, 321), but even (cf. *tamen*, 331) for the much larger battle, there is a place distant enough that it appears as a stable gleam (*fulgor*, 332). This does not (or should not) strike us as paradoxical, and hence it is no more paradoxical that given something remarkably minute like atoms, the distance at which they appear static is proportionally much smaller. Motion is perceivable, but this does not require that it be perceivable to everyone in every respect. After careful consideration of principles already contained within our worldview, what might initially seem paradoxical turns out to fit right in.

This Lucretian passage illustrates well a subtlety in paradox resolution. Resolving superficial paradoxes, as with substantive paradoxes, can involve an alteration of worldview, but one of a different nature. In the process of recognizing the consistency of a supposed paradox with our worldview, we often refine, disambiguate, or even extend our commitments. However, we do not swap incompatible views. In order to accept the Epicurean position that atoms ultimately make up the cosmos, we give up the contrary view that, e.g., the cosmos consists fundamentally in elemental earth, air, wind, and water. In order to accept that atomic motion can appear motionless, Lucretius' analogies justify refining the view that "motion is perceptible" to "motion is perceptible *to those proportionately near*", that "distant

motion can appear static” to “*proportionally* distant motion can appear static”, or, more basically, that the recognizable experience of seeing such seemingly unmoving sheep or soldiers justifies the consequential belief that motion can appear static. In the first two refinements, we’ve clarified by expansion a commitment we already hold. In the last extension, we’ve developed our worldview through synthesis of what it already contained. Either way, faced with such a superficial paradox, our worldview comes to absorb it, whereas with a substantive paradox, its adoption forces the worldview to change.

Yet this clean division between substantive and superficial paradox belies the complex, error-prone nature of human cognition and the nuanced ways ancient philosophers, particularly the Stoics for our purposes, conceptualized believing and what counts as paradoxical. It is fundamental to ancient philosophers that humans tend to be poor reasoners, despite the natural possibility of perfection. We are reckless in our thinking and thus come to believe many unjustified and often false things. We buy into supposed states of affairs before we have adequately considered them, hastily weighing whether they follow from or fit with our prior commitments, and draw invalid inferences, erroneously judging the fact in question to follow from elements of our belief-system. These proclivities lead to holding inconsistent and even directly contradictory views, with the result that we have confused and incoherent worldviews. This paradoxical cognitive state *qua* contradiction takes a particularly prominent place in the thought of Socrates and the Stoics, and it underlies the nature and role of paradox in each.

The Stoics’ intellectual predecessor Socrates complicates the nature of paradox and its resolution through the inclusion of tacit, unconscious acceptance within what qualifies as

a belief in something.⁷¹ As a result, something can be substantively paradoxical in respect to a subset of beliefs that justify its contrary, at the same time as it is superficially paradoxical in respect to a different subset that supports and in fact constitutes tacit belief in what seems paradoxical. In the *Gorgias* 474b.2-5, Socrates makes the surprising claim that not only does he accept the paradox (cf. ἄτοπᾶ; 473a.1) that “doing wrong is worse than suffering it”, but, in fact, both his objecting interlocutor Polus and everyone else believes it too.⁷² And as a result, everyone would choose to suffer wrong rather than do it (474b.9). Polus, of course, immediately denies this, assuring Socrates that he and others certainly do not (474b.6-8) and would not (474b.10-11). Indeed, up to this point, Polus has argued the opposite (e.g. 472d.4 and 473b.1). According to Socrates, then, everyone, including Polus, is in a paradoxical position, believing *both* that suffering wrong is worse than doing it *and* its paradoxical inversion.

Yet how can Socrates claim that Polus believes precisely what he denies?⁷³ It cannot be that Socrates thinks Polus consciously recognizes the paradox as true or even possibly true. This is ruled out by Polus’ presumed honesty, which Socrates seems satisfied about (472d.4), together with how adamantly Polus denies the paradox (cf. 473e.6-8). Polus shows none of the hesitancy that marks a mind unsure about two positions until well into the discussion, where he slides from such affirmations like “definitely” (πάνυ γε; 475a.10) and “how could it not be so?” (πῶς γὰρ οὐ; 475b.13) to “it seems so” (ἔοικεν; 475c.13) and “apparently” (φαίνεται; 475e.8). Nor does Socrates’ remark simply mean that Polus’ has incon-

⁷¹ On the “Socratic” nature of Stoicism and Socrates’ influence, see Long (2002) 67-96 and (1988), Sedley (1993), and Van der Waerdt (1994).

⁷² Cf. Socrates’ similar remark later in the dialogue at 495c-e that although Callicles denies it, he actually does believe that the pleasant and the good are different and that knowledge and bravery are the same and both good, if Callicles “were to inspect himself rightly” (αὐτὸς αὐτὸν θεάσεται ὀρθῶς; 485e.1-2).

⁷³ For a fuller discussion of this puzzling Socratic claim, see Vlastos (1994) and Brickhouse and Smith (1992), which my discussion draws from. On this passage’s relationship to the Stoic theory of conceptions and dialectic, see Dyson (2009) 128-144.

sistent beliefs, in accordance with some of which he has come to believe in the preferability of committing injustice, while others can be shown to entail, with some additional premises, the preferability of suffering injustice. This can be so without justifying Socrates' claim that Polus believes *at the beginning of the discussion* in both contraries. Polus could be wholly unaware that his beliefs are inconsistent and entail, however far removed, different conclusions. Then, only upon Socratic questioning, which reveals such inconsistency and draws out the conflicting conclusions, would Polus be in some way committed to two contradictory positions.⁷⁴ Rather, Socrates implies that at the beginning of the argument Polus *already* holds the beliefs necessary to entail the paradox and already holds such a set of beliefs that, should Polus recall them (or have them called to mind), he would not only agree with Socrates, but also withdraw his acceptance of the preferability of committing injustice. That is, Socrates' proposal that Polus *actually* believes the Socratic paradox (474b.2-5) rests on the supposed fact that given sufficient clarity of his current, relevant commitments, Polus would accept the paradox *and* see that he precipitously accepted its contrary. This counts as a tacit form of belief because should the context have been different or the question(s) framed differently, other beliefs already within Polus' worldview could have been at the forefront of his mind, beliefs of a sort that would lead him to ascribe to Socrates' paradox.⁷⁵

In his successful questioning of Polus, in which he demonstrates Polus' agreement, Socrates shows us that the Socratic position is for Polus both substantively paradoxical, since

⁷⁴ Brickhouse and Smith (1992) 66.

⁷⁵ This is not such a strange notion of belief, in my opinion. At least in some instances, when asked "What do you believe about X?", even concerning something we've considered before, we do not answer the question by trying to remember what we previously decided, but rather consider our various current commitments germane to our opinion on X. What we believe, then, very much rests on what commitments presently appear salient and how we interpret their bearing on the question. Equally, Socrates' claim that Polus and others would act as if they believed the paradox plausibly suggests that tacit or implicit beliefs are revealed by how we act. Even if we say otherwise, acting in a way consistent with a belief offers compelling evidence that we actually do in some way ascribe to it, even if we consciously hold its contrary (cf. Schwitzgebel (2011) 191-193). Consider, for instance, the well-studied phenomenon of implicit bias (for an overview, Greenwald and Krieger (2006)).

Polus gives up his earlier belief in the preferability of doing injustice at least for the moment (475d.1-3), and superficially paradoxical, since Polus actually agreed with Socrates (according at least to Socrates) all along (475e.3-6).⁷⁶ However, the nature of Polus' acquiescence hints at the laboriousness of the resolution of these sorts of twofold paradoxes. Despite Socrates' success in bringing Polus to accept the paradox, Polus only does so grudgingly.⁷⁷ While a bruised ego no doubt contributes to such half-heartedness, it also stems from the continued incoherence of his beliefs.⁷⁸ It is telling that Polus admits to the truth of the Socratic paradox "in accordance with this argument at least" (κατὰ γε τοῦτον τὸν λόγον; 475e.3).⁷⁹ Rather than simply being petulant, Polus perhaps recognizes that just because Socrates has shown him how some of his beliefs entail the Socratic paradox, he still holds others in support of his original position. Indeed we might expect Polus to nod along with Callicles' more spirited and discerning defense that turns on the belief that what is worse by nature is different from what is worse by custom (481d-486d) or that since pleasure *simpliciter* is good, conventional "injustice" is in fact not shameful and suffering "injustice" is worse (491d-492c).⁸⁰ Undoubtedly, Polus shares Callicles' sentiment when Callicles responds to Socrates, after a lengthy back-and-forth, with: "I don't know. In a certain way, Socrates, you seem to me to speak correctly, but I have suffered what most experience – I am not persuaded entirely [πάνου] by you" (513c.3-6). Socrates assures him that full acceptance will come, but only after many fur-

⁷⁶ Polus' fellow interlocutor Callicles thinks Polus was not saying what he believed and was simply too ashamed to do so (482e).

⁷⁷ Cf. Polus' claim at the end of his discussion with Socrates that their conclusions are "absurd" (480e.1), despite the fact that Socrates thinks they follow from all the agreed-upon premises.

⁷⁸ Cf. Brickhouse and Smith (1992) 69.

⁷⁹ For our purposes, whether or not Socrates' line of argument is valid or persuasive is beside the point. On the success or failure of Socrates in this passage, see, e.g., Berman (1991), Vlastos (1967), and Irwin (1979).

⁸⁰ If Polus ascribes to this commonly held hedonistic principle, even given support of all Socrates' suggestions in his discussion with Polus, Polus can still equally reason to the worse nature of injustice. For if *any* pleasure is good and (thus) *any* pain bad, then the more painful suffering of injustice remains worse than committing it, in accordance with an argument beginning with this hedonistic evaluation.

ther examinations of these same questions (513c.8-9). A paradox that stems from the incoherency of one's worldview may take a long time to fully and truly resolve, for it likely arises from a great number of interrelated yet inconsistent beliefs involving diverse logical relations and lines of thought. Thus, with each investigation into why something is paradoxical to us, we may only integrate the paradox within a certain nexus of beliefs, even as it remains paradoxical to a different nexus. And so long as the system of beliefs that make up our worldview remains disordered, whether or not something strikes us as paradoxical will depend on which frame of our worldview we happen to view and interpret it through.

V: Conclusion

In ancient Greek and Roman thought up to the 2nd century AD, the notion of what is “paradoxical” – that is, paradoxicality – covers a diverse range of entities or features, from physical entities to philosophical premises to rhetorical ornamentation. Yet in each case, what constitutes its paradoxicality is the way it subverts our expectations and runs contrary to our commitments about the world, even as it strikes us as at least conceivably understandable. Nor is this reaction merely epistemic; rather, accompanying it is an affective jolt of disbelief or surprise. Nevertheless, the nexus of views, concepts, and the logical and associative connections that relate them, which *in toto* make up our worldviews, against which paradoxes collide, is highly complex and – for most of us – coherent only in pockets and pieces but thus, overall, incoherent and fragmentary. As a result, paradoxicality is an equally complex phenomenon as it is experienced by a given worldview, for it takes on a different quality (or wholly fails to obtain) relative to different facets of the same worldview. This complexity of paradox and the confusion it entails take a fundamental position in Stoic and Senecan thinking, as it does for Socrates and his interlocutors, and it is to this we now turn.

The Nature of Paradoxicality in Seneca

As the ignorant grasp the finger-tip and not the moon,
so those who cling to words, know not my truth.
- *Lankavatara Sutra* 223-224¹

I: Introduction

In the previous chapter, we saw in broad strokes the general ancient conceptualization of paradoxicality, its various instantiations, and the psychological and epistemological underpinnings that both qualify something as paradoxical and inform the nature of its potential resolution. In this chapter, we'll focus in on Seneca, in whose works paradox features prominently and represents both a crucial element of human life and a sophisticated philosophical and artistic tool. Here, we'll begin to see how Seneca treats paradoxes and conceives of their place in his philosophy, the cosmos, and the worldviews of both the ignorant and the wise, although this will merely lay the groundwork for a fuller exploration throughout this study.

For clarity's sake, I'll divide the sorts of paradoxes we find in Seneca into three inter-related categories: the "semantic", the "conceptual", and the "thaumastic". I do not suggest that Seneca himself thinks of paradox with these distinctions, and I offer them simply as a division useful for grasping the complexity of paradox's place in Senecan thought. Nor do I suggest that such a division is unique to the thought of Seneca. Indeed, we will see these divisions encompass many types of paradox already discussed in the previous chapter. Howev-

¹ Trans. Suzuki (2000a) with slight changes. Cf. §196: "Therefore, Mahamati, let son or daughter of a good family take good heed not to get attached to words as being in perfect conformity with meaning, because the truth is not of the letter. Be not like the one who looks at the finger-tip. For instance, Mahamati, when a man with his finger-tip points at something to somebody, the finger-tip may be taken wrongly for the thing pointed at; in like manner, Mahamati, the people belonging to the class of the ignorant and simple-minded, like those of a childish group, are unable even unto their death to abandon the idea that in the finger-tip of words there is the meaning itself, and will not grasp ultimate reality because of their intent clinging to words which are no more than the finger-tip to them." On these passages and this sutra's theory of the relationship between language, meaning, and truth, see Suzuki (2000b) 105-114.

er, I will suggest that through this division we can better see the Stoic understanding of paradoxicality depicted in Senecan thought together with the uniquely Senecan appropriation, exploration, and literary rendering of this Stoic approach. Through this division, I will draw out two unifying, conceptual threads that run through Senecan paradoxicality:

One, for Seneca, following in earlier Stoics' and Socrates' footsteps, paradoxicality itself arises solely out of the ignorance in which all who are not wise live out their lives. Only the unwise, we fools, find anything paradoxical. Only we experience the attendant surprised disbelief and confused incomprehension. The world itself, outside of the human mind, lacks paradoxicality. It is a creation of the ignorance that corrupts our perception and consideration of the rationally ordered cosmos and manufactures incongruity, misalignment, and the potential for the unexpected. Paradoxes arise and, in their linguistic form, are manufactured only because the ignorant mind has faulty expectations or has formed unstable and often erroneous beliefs. Wisdom, then, frees humans from the paradoxical, for it sees the world as it actually is, not in its entirety – the sage is not omniscient – but with a clear, accurate, and unchangeable grasp of the features of the world it knows.² Of crucial importance, Stoic ignorance consists in and results from the fool's insecure, shifting, and incoherent body of beliefs. His worldview involves both the true and the false and both what strikes him clearly as patently true and what he accepts with the foggiest of comprehension. Any piece of it, any belief, sits ill-fitted to the whole, as it contradicts other pieces, either in themselves or in their implications, and is thus liable to change or appear mistaken. Hence, this disintegrated, frac-

² Wisdom, of course, will not rid the sage's world of the presence of all paradoxical claims. But such paradoxical claims will either be merely nominal, insofar as they contradict received belief, but do not contradict the sage's worldview (such as, e.g., the Stoic paradoxes), or they'll be the erroneous product of an ignorant mind and be rejected by the sage.

tured, and ignorant worldview, through which we experience and attempt to make sense of the world, is rife with paradox within itself and reflects this paradoxicality into the world.

And two, Seneca is particularly interested in paradoxes that are both substantive and superficial; that is, those that bring to light certain contradictory beliefs even as the paradoxes are consistent with others. Paradox doesn't indicate, at least primarily, factual error within a worldview, but rather confusion and careless, faulty, or fuzzy thinking. For Seneca, it reveals a normally unrecognized blurring of multiple conceptual frameworks that consist of nominally identical ideas (i.e. different concepts identified by the same term): those of everyday, received language and human society and that of Stoic philosophy and the perfectly rational world order. The principal problem lies not in the errors of the former and the accuracy of the latter, such that we remedy our ignorance through the utter deconstruction of the common frameworks and the perfected expansion and fortification of their Stoic counterpart. It is essential to the Stoic system that while the fool's worldview is flawed, it nonetheless contains the seeds of knowledge and important truths (of Stoicism), however buried, opaque, or inchoate they may be. To entirely unravel this framework would deny the fool any loom upon which to weave a new and accurate worldview. Indeed, Seneca's approach relies upon the fact that in some ways our received worldview gets it right, so long as we get clear about what it really contains and how it logically fits together. The ideas that make up our different worldviews bear a legitimate similarity in their distinct conceptualizations, but we fools, in our hasty thinking, fail to distinguish similarity from identity. Seneca enacts the remedy for our ignorance, then, through the integration of these frameworks by means of

fostering the disambiguation of the concepts and their logical interrelations within these overlapping systems of thought.³

Of particular importance now, we can see a prominent facet of Seneca's use of paradoxicality through Seneca's repeatedly emphasis on never losing sight of the signified substance and reality (*res*) that words (*verba*) are meant to identify, describe, or reveal. We must be careful to always treat language as a means to an end – wisdom, virtue, and the good life – without getting tied up in linguistic and logical analysis for its own sake or over trivial matters, divorced from their role in producing and securing wisdom.⁴ Yet it is through language and the ideas it represents, in their essential role in reason and our worldviews, that we experience the world and ourselves in it. Words, or, strictly speaking, the conceptions they encapsulate, shape the apparent nature of the *res* they are taken to signify – whether real or conjured before our mind's eye – even as we ideally shape and employ our words to reflect reality. In their interpretative power, then, words construct our lived experience, “reality” as we see and imagine it.

But for us fools, this construction often meets resistance and is, sometimes jarringly, refuted and, perhaps, reformed when it only partially matches reality itself. And Seneca uses this reciprocal relationship between *verba* and *res* in his works to manifest and juxtapose, through paradoxical claims, word-play, imagery, and content, the fractured “realities” that

³ The discussion of Atherton (1993) 39-128 on the risks that ambiguity poses to wisdom and human ethical progress offers a helpful and instructive parallel to this discussion of paradox.

⁴ In doing this, Seneca isn't breaking from Stoic philosophy, in the importance it places on logical expertise (cf. Long (1996a)), nor necessarily undervaluing logical skill (cf., e.g., *Ep.* 90.29 on the importance of dialectic), but rather is responding to what he sees as an undue obsession with logical argument to the detriment of a philosophically fulfilled life in the contemporary Stoic milieu. In this, he prefigures Epictetus' approach, which leaves the perfection of dialectical expertise until later in the philosophical regimen (cf. *Diss.* 3.2). We might see in this a reflection of and response to Socrates' suggestion in the *Republic* 539b-d that young people are as likely to abuse dialectic as they are to benefit from it. For the most even-handed and subtle discussion of Seneca's views toward logic and dialectic, see Barnes (1997b) 12-23, cf. Allegri (2004) 75-81. For a less generous view, see Cooper (2004). For more on this, see Chapter Four.

our murky worldviews represent, bringing both the incongruity and the similarity of these into sharper focus and, ideally, facilitating their clarification, reshaping, and integration. In other words, the centrality in Senecan thought of the inconsistency that defines Stoic ignorance and the delusional experience of paradox as a feature of “reality” that thus arises motivates his conspicuous paradoxes. Just as analogical language has the power to bring the reader *in rem praesentem* (Ep. 59.6), so too does Senecan paradox draw the contradictory nature of the fool’s “world” into sharp relief through projecting its paradoxicality into the text.⁵ The revelatory reflection of this existential and experiential paradoxicality, as a product of ignorance, in Seneca’s text is no small matter, for, as we will see, it is fundamental to the fool’s vicious and dissatisfactory life and yet especially liable to go unrecognized or be unhelpfully misunderstood. While, before him, Cicero has ironically “played”⁶ in the *Paradoxa Stoicorum* with the rhetorical possibilities and challenges of paradox offered by Stoic thought, Seneca more thoroughly expands paradox in the whole-hearted service of Stoic philosophy and pedagogy beyond the confines of formal dialectic and syllogism into the fabric of his philosophical thinking and writing as a whole.⁷

II: Ignorance in Stoic thought

Before we can understand the relationship between paradox and ignorance, we need to first get clear about what precisely ignorance is in Stoicism. Fools are defined by their ignorance, which, for the Stoics, amounts to their lack of wisdom or knowledge, and it is this

⁵ On this notion of *in rem praesentem* in Seneca and in general, see, e.g., Bartsch (2009) 192-194 and Ker (2007, 2009) and Chapter Four Section III.B.

⁶ Cf. *ego tibi illa ipsa [sc. paradoxa Stoicorum] ludens conieci in communes locos* (“I have brought for you into public reach these [Stoic paradoxes] themselves to pass the time”) (§3).

⁷ On points of contact between Seneca’s and Cicero’s rhetorical manipulations of Stoic paradoxes, see Williams (2006) 159-161. On the style and intent of the *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, see Englert (1990) and Wallach (1990).

condition that underlies and shapes their every thought, feeling, and action. It informs their experience of the world at a foundational level. When we consider what constitutes ignorance, we might identify it as holding as true what is in reality false. Thus we might say that someone who is racist is ignorant, in so far as they hold false assumptions about some racial group. Or, we might identify ignorance as a lack of views, in the way we say that a child is ignorant of quantum mechanics. And such forms of ignorance may be domain specific, as in the prior examples of someone ignorant about racial groups or ignorant of physics, or general. A blanket attribution of ignorance may imply that one is generally misinformed and wrongheaded or (perhaps more commonly) that one lacks some basic level or breadth of awareness about the world as a whole. Yet in both notions, ignorance concerns *what* someone believes, viz. falsehoods or nothing at all.⁸ The Stoics hold a different view. Stoic ignorance only incidentally concerns the truth-value of one's views. Instead, ignorance denotes a state of mind: ignorance technically consists not in *what* views one holds, but rather in *how* one holds them.⁹ For the Stoics, the essential difference between wisdom and ignorance lies in how stable one's views are, which depends on the overall coherency of all one's commitments with another.

The Stoics' description of ignorance follows from their unique conceptualization of belief and knowledge.¹⁰ Stobaeus summarizes the Stoic position, writing:

They [the Stoics] say that the sage never supposes anything false, and that he does not assent at all to anything non-kataleptic [ἀκαταλήπτῳ], owing to his not forming beliefs and his being ignorant of nothing. For ignorance [ἄγνοιαν] is changeable and weak assent. But the sage supposes nothing weakly, but rather, securely and firmly

⁸ For discussions about different notions of ignorance both ancient and modern, see Vogt (2012a) 25-50 and Vogt and Haas (2015).

⁹ Thus Seneca can write of the advanced Stoic *proficiens* who holds all the same views as the sage yet still lacks the stability that makes his views knowledge (*Ep.* 75.7-10).

¹⁰ On Stoic epistemology, see Frede (1987, 1999b), Vogt (2012b), Meinwald (2005), and Long and Sedley (1987) Vol. 1 236-259.

[ἀσφαλῶς καὶ βεβαίως]; and so he does not form beliefs either. For there are two kinds of beliefs, assent to the non-kataleptic, and weak supposition, and these are alien to the sage's disposition. So precipitancy [τὸ προίπτειν] and assent in advance of cognition are attributes of the precipitate inferior man, whereas they do not befall the man who is well-natured and perfect and virtuous. (2.111.18-112.8 [=LS 41G]; trans. LS with changes)

Ignorance, the Stoics surprisingly claim, simply is belief.¹¹ Stoic philosophy distinguishes between two basic epistemological categories, belief (δόξα) and knowledge (ἐπιστημή). Only the sage has knowledge, and everything she holds to be true is knowledge; she never has a belief. Everyone other than the sage has only beliefs and never knowledge.¹² But belief and knowledge are not distinguished as such by whether or not their content is true, but rather by the state of mind of the individual. The Stoics define belief as “weak” and “changeable” assent. Both belief and knowledge are the result of an “impression” (φαντασία), a physical movement in the mind with a corresponding linguistic counterpart, e.g., “This is a book” or “This cake is delicious,” that strikes an individual's mind and to which an individual assents, accepting it as representative of reality.¹³ But the fool's assent is weak – resulting in a belief – because his whole body of beliefs, i.e. his worldview, is weak. His worldview is not entirely coherent, for he holds beliefs that, at least, can lead to contradictory views or are contradictory themselves. The fool's commitments do not stand in an ordered, logical relationship to each other. As a result, any additional belief will also be ill fitting and weak. In other words, due to its very nature, the fool's worldview involves internal paradox, for any given belief the fool holds contradicts, either directly or by implication, some other belief or beliefs within the fool's worldview. Indeed, in so far as the essential instability and changeability of belief

¹¹ See Meinwald (2005) and Vogt (2012b).

¹² See Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.151-2 (=Long and Sedley 1987 [LS] 41C) and Stobaeus 2.111.18-112.8 (=LS 41G).

¹³ See, e.g., Seneca, *Ep.* 117.13 (=LS 33E); Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 8.70 (=LS 33C) and 7.151-157 (=LS 41C).

thus arises from paradoxicality, a faulty worldview constitutes ignorance precisely because it is paradoxical.

Belief's weakness does not reflect how strongly the fool may, as it were, buy into the impression. Weak assent is not half-hearted or provisional. Rather, it is changeable and unstable. The incoherency of any one belief in relation to one's worldview as a whole means that the fool is liable to change, replace, or reject any one of her previous beliefs in the face of missed and unconsidered details or persuasion by someone else. For instance, a Socrates figure would be able to uncover the inconsistencies inherent in the fool's worldview and thus force her to either alter or reject some number of her beliefs, at least for a time. And this ignorance as an unstable worldview reinforces itself. Due to our ignorance, we fools are hasty, "precipitate" thinkers, for we do not consider our impressions carefully enough before assenting.¹⁴ Before we have sufficiently considered their integrability within our worldview, we are likely to accept them. Even or perhaps especially when presented with the sorts of impressions we ought to assent to, the so-called "kataleptic" impressions, which accurately represent reality and have a certain persuasive "pull" to them, we recklessly assent before we have recognized how precisely the new belief fits within our worldview or whether it fully fits within it at all.¹⁵ In this way, even commitments we have made that we might think we cannot be persuaded against, say, that we are awake as we read this and not dreaming, are still weak and unstable. Outside of a worldview whose every aspect logically reinforces the others, any fool's belief may be called into doubt.

¹⁴ On precipitancy, see Herculaneum papyrus 1020 4.1 (=LS 41D); Plutarch, *St. Rep.* 1056e-f (=LS 41E); Stobaeus 2.111.18-112.8 (=LS 41G); and Seneca, *Ben.* 1.1.1, *Ben.* 1.1.15, *Ben.* 7.26.5; *Ep.* 24.24, 91.21. See also, Ranocchia (2012) and Vogt (2012b) 163.

¹⁵ Cf. Vogt (2012b) 163 and Brittain (2014). On kataleptic impressions, see esp. Diogenes Laertius 7.46 (=LS 40C) and Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.253-260 (=LS 40K).

Knowledge is the opposite. Knowledge is “secure” (ἀσφαλὲς) and “stable” (βεβαία) assent.¹⁶ Like belief, this stability is the result of the sage’s unalterable worldview and the fact that every impression she has assented to resulted in (a piece of) knowledge.¹⁷ Unlike her inferior counterpart, the sage never assents precipitously and only ever to the right sorts of impressions (viz. kataleptic impressions). Thus, all pieces of (her) knowledge fit together in a perfectly coherent and ordered fashion. The logical relationships between them are those of consistency and interdependency, given that Stoic premises in different fields, as it were, ground each other. Thus knowledge, understood as a system of “pieces” of knowledge, fully corresponds to the ordered cosmos, which is its object. Indeed, the fact that a complete and consistent system of thoughts about the world is attainable is guaranteed by the providential and rational ordering of the cosmos.¹⁸ As a result, the sage’s knowledge is not changeable “by reason,” meaning that she is not liable to give up any piece of her knowledge as a result of argument or hastily overlooked matters now brought to light: Any new impression will either be rejected due to its non-kataleptic nature or, if assented to, necessarily fit into her body of knowledge.¹⁹ Importantly, the claim that the sage is “ignorant of nothing” does not mean that she is omniscient.²⁰ “Ignorance” is the same thing as belief. As such, to say that

¹⁶ Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7.151-2 (=LS 41C).

¹⁷ On the other, related meanings of “knowledge,” see Stobaeus 2.73.16-74.3 (=LS 41H) with Brouwer (2014) 7-49. This is, of course, not to say that the sage has always been so and as such has only ever assented to impressions such that knowledge resulted. Before becoming wise, the sage likely had to arduously work at his body of beliefs in order to bring it about that, ultimately, every impression he still assented to was kataleptic and duly considered, at which point they would be knowledge. This seemingly drastic and sudden change was much derided by opponents of Stoicism, cf. Plutarch, *Prof.* 75C (=LS 61S).

¹⁸ Cicero, *Acad.* 1.41-2 (=LS41B); Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.247-52 (=LS40E).

¹⁹ Stobaeus 2.73.16-74.3 (=LS 41H). On the complexity of such cognitive stability in a world in which the sage cannot be certain of how the future will turn out, see Seneca, *Ben.* 4.33-35. The sage will never change his mind so long as the situation remains the same, but given new information as a result of natural change, the sage of course will wisely adjust accordingly. The sage may be right to plan to sail given clear skies and all the relevant considerations, but if a storm arises that he could not have seen coming, his prudent change of plans does not constitute the sort of changeability of the fool’s beliefs. On this, see Section III.C below.

²⁰ Stobaeus 2.111.18-112.8 (=LS 41G)

the sage is ignorant of nothing is simply to say that she has no beliefs, only knowledge. She may very well not know what the weather will be next week, but this is the result of the absence of kataleptic impressions concerning next week's weather (at least for this particular sage), not any qualitative deficiency in her knowledge. Equally, the sage's knowledge does not rule out learning more.²¹ The sage can have knowledge and a consistent, stable worldview without knowing the finer details of quantum physics. Should she come to learn them, her body of knowledge grows and her worldview alters through this augmentation. But her worldview will not change in the way the fool's is liable to. None of her prior commitments change or are at risk of changing as a result of adding new knowledge, for each additional piece of knowledge, due to her non-precipitant, wise thinking, integrates fully into her current worldview.

The fool's ignorance, then, does not rule out having a partially accurate worldview, only a fully consistent and unchanging worldview. An assent's status as either a belief or a piece of knowledge only directly dictates *how* the view is held by the cognizer, whether weakly or stably. *What* is held, whether it is a truth or falsehood, depends on the nature of the contents of the impression. Technically speaking, the only entities to which the Stoics attribute truth-value are "assertibles" (ἀξιόματα), the proposition signified by most impressions.²² Thus only the assertion, e.g., "this is a page of writing", that, let's say, corresponds to your present impression, is strictly true or false. Nonetheless, the Stoics do speak, through a cer-

²¹ Cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 109.3.4-5: "There will always remain, even for the sage, something that one might discover and something towards which one's mind may foray" (*semper enim etiam sapienti restabit quod inveniatur et quo animus eius excurrat*); cf. §5 and §16.

²² Some impressions may contain only imperatives or hypotheticals. On *axiomata*, see Chapters 34 and 35 of Long and Sedley (1987), Vogt (2012b) 171-178, Bobzien (1998) 99-101, and (2003) 86-99.

tain transitivity, of true or false impressions, as bearers of assertions, and, at least in later Stoics, periodically of true or false beliefs, as constitutive of impressions.²³

In this discussion, I have relied on a famous Stoic proposal, namely that there are “kataleptic” impressions. Stoic epistemology discusses two fundamental types of impressions: kataleptic (καταληπτική) and non-kataleptic. A kataleptic impression, as mentioned, is “one which is true and of such a kind that it could not turn out false.”²⁴ Such impressions have a certain “clarity” and “impact” that distinguish them from their non-kataleptic counterparts, which are deficient in their representation of reality, whether through inaccuracy or indefiniteness (such as a blurred visual impression or a poorly grasped abstract impression). Such indefinite, non-kataleptic impressions may well be true, but only the truth of the kataleptic impressions is guaranteed, and only their truth is fully recognizable as such for cognizers. The question of how cognizers are sensitive to the fact that a given impression of theirs is kataleptic is much debated and subject to various objections raised already by ancient critics (such as, e.g., is it not possible that an impression merely *appear* kataleptic?).²⁵ These issues are not my topic, however, and hence I will only gesture at what, I think, in general agreement with Michael Frede, the ultimate Stoic reply is. As they see it, we are providentially such as to be sensitive to kataleptic impressions.²⁶ We are built such that a particular impression, given certain conditions (clarity, lack of impediments, and so on), simply tells

²³ For “true” or “false” belief, see, e.g., in Seneca *Ep.* 16.9.2 (*ex falsa opinione*), *Ep.* 76.22.5 (*falsa opinio*), *Ep.* 76.27.2 (*vera opinio*), and *Ep.* 90.34.6 (*opinionibus falsis*). This transitivity has its own complications, primarily in the consequent notions of “true and false” impressions – those that correspond to a true proposition and a false one – and “neither true nor false” impressions – those that involve “assertions” that are not properly assertions and thus are not truth-evaluable (Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.242-246 [=LS 39G]). Cf. Vogt (2012b) 171-175, Hankinson (2003), and Frede (1999b).

²⁴ Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.151-152 (=LS 41C).

²⁵ A central disagreement is whether a kataleptic impression’s efficacy stems from some consciously recognized, phenomenological aspect or from some determined causal relationship to the cognizer’s state of mind (on the former, Sedley (2002) and Perin (2005), on the latter, Frede (1987), cf. Nawar (2014), who rejects neither).

²⁶ E.g., Cicero, *Acad.* 1.40-41 (=LS 40B) and Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.247-253 (=LS 40E). See Frede (1987) 157-163.

us that this is how things are. Both fools and sages assent to kataleptic impressions, which results in “cognitions” (κατάληψεις), although fools do so inconsistently and precipitously.

All this means that (1) the fool’s worldview will involve various true commitments stemming from assents to both kataleptic and non-kataleptic impressions, together with any number of false views adopted in haste or justified by other false commitments we have made. And (2), the fool’s worldview will also involve input – both perceptual and non-perceptual – in the form of kataleptic impressions that are identical to the sage’s, even as the fool’s faulty, unstable state of mind renders such accepted information belief or ignorance and not knowledge. Fools rid themselves of ignorance and belief when their worldview becomes integrated through retaining these cognitions, while revising or rejecting the inconsistent commitments until only fully coherent cognitions remain. That is, fools come to have wisdom when they resolve the internal paradoxes within their ignorant worldviews. When fools eliminate this internal paradoxicality, we will see, so too do they remove paradox from their experience of the cosmos and their own lives, and seeing reality finally through the clear lens of wisdom, the world ceases to be full of paradox.

It is a consequence of the Stoic view that this change, from fool to sage, cannot be gradual.²⁷ Since we are considering two comprehensive states of minds, and since foolishness exists if any bit of a given state of mind is incoherent with the rest, a person is a fool until the very moment where she switches into a sage. Strictly speaking, progress is not the progress of becoming “more and more wise” – one either is foolish or wise. Nevertheless, progress is possible.²⁸ As one recognizes a growing number of one’s assumptions as mere beliefs, one is going to attain something like hypothetical attitudes to them, not, say, rejecting

²⁷ See, e.g., Plutarch, *Prof.* 75C (=LS 61S) with Brouwer (2014) 51-89.

²⁸ See, esp., *Ep.* 75 and Plutarch, *Com. Not.* 1063a-b (=LS 61T).

them outright (for many beliefs, as we saw, are in a sense true), but rethinking how things fit together, holding assumptions up to scrutiny, and so on. Via this process, it becomes possible that things “fall into place” for the person who comes to attain wisdom. It is widely assumed that Seneca is especially interested in the states of minds of progressors, i.e. those who aim to attain virtue and wisdom, and who are en route towards becoming virtuous and wise, but who face characteristic challenges in attaining a stable state of mind. It is this process that, accordingly, I shall analyze further throughout.

III: Types of paradox in Seneca

(A) “Conceptual” paradox

Seneca’s *On Favors* revolves around the paradoxical idea that, in the domain of “favors” (*beneficia*),²⁹ it is the act of giving and not the object given that counts as a favor, and it is the nature and quality of the “intention” (*voluntas*) behind this act that makes it a favor.³⁰ A favor, Seneca writes, is “a kind act that gives joy and takes joy in granting it and is inclined towards and willingly prepared for that which the action does” (*benevola actio tribuens gaudium capiensque tribuendo in id, quod facit, prona et sponte sua parata*; *Ben.* 1.6.1-3). This surprising reformulation stems from the identification of (granting) a favor as a good and virtuous act (*bonestum*), distinct from the merely “indifferent” object or state of affairs bestowed by that fa-

²⁹ I translate *beneficium* as “favor” rather than the more common “benefit” in order to avoid any confusion with the broader Stoic notion of “benefit” (ὠφέλεια or *prodesse* [see, e.g., Seneca, *Ep.* 109]), which identifies the good (*Ep.* 117.2). Seneca ties such benefit directly to favors, for in granting a favor, the sage aims at benefiting (*prodesse*; *Ben.* 2.31.2.3) and pleasing the recipient. It is unclear how much the Senecan notion of benefit and favor overlap, but in one regard at least they are certainly distinct: Seneca denies that someone can do a favor for themselves (*Ben.* 5.7-11), for granting favors, he suggests, depends on the presence of two parties. Yet sages can benefit themselves (*Ep.* 109.120), and in benefiting others, they benefit themselves (cf. Stobaeus 2.101.21-102.3 [=LS 60P]). On “benefit” as the good in Stoicism, see Vogt (2007) and Frede (1999a).

³⁰ On *On Favors*, see, esp., Griffin (2007, 2013) and Inwood (1995).

vor.³¹ Since only sages are capable of *honestas*, another famous Stoic paradox follows: strictly speaking, only the sage can do favors.³² These paradoxical propositions and the other Stoic paradoxes this study will explore stand as central examples of what I call “conceptual” paradox. A conceptual paradox is a paradoxical word, idea, remark, or figure of speech. It is linguistic, but it does not involve any apparent internal logical contradiction. Seneca and the Stoics argue that while these paradoxes contradict certain conceptualizations we have of the matters at hand, they nonetheless match or follow from other ideas we hold. We may puzzle at the suggestion that what really counts as a “favor” is the act itself, but, as Seneca’s defense draws out, we do already identify the giver’s intention as essential to a favor or gift.³³ No one misses the irony in calling the Trojan horse a Greek “gift.”³⁴ By drawing out how his new description of a favor does not contradict crucial assumptions we already hold concerning favors, Seneca highlights the confusion in our idea of a favor and helps us understand his claim and resolve its paradoxicality.

Unsurprisingly, Seneca provides no unified theory of paradox, but he does offer us an unusually direct description of the nature of conceptual paradoxes. This treatment makes central the role of *consuetudo* – a generally accepted mode of thought and language – in order to explain how conceptual paradox contradicts certain facets of our worldview even as it fits within others and what this means for resolving them. Amidst the discussions of *On Favors*, Seneca explores yet another Stoic paradox, that “he who gladly accepts a favor has already returned it” (*qui libenter accipit, beneficium reddidisse*; *Ben.* 2.31.1.2-3).³⁵ One who truly grants a

³¹ See, e.g., *Ben.* 4.1.3 and 9.2-3.

³² *Ben.* 5.12-17 and *Ep.* 81.8-14 (cf. Arius Didymus, *Ecl.* 2.104.6-9).

³³ *Ben.* 2.33.1-2, cf. 1.1-6.2 and 19.1-20.3.

³⁴ Consider, of course, the famously paradoxical remark: “I fear the Greeks even as they bring gifts” (*timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*; Vergil, *Aen.* 2.49).

³⁵ On Seneca’s treatment of this paradox in *On Favors*, see Inwood (1995) 85-92 and Roller (2001) 77-82.

favor, Seneca explains, expects only a gracious acceptance of the favor in return, even if the recipient of a favor incurs an additional obligation to return the favor (2.31-33). His interlocutor objects that this would mean the recipient of a favor could return the favor despite doing nothing (2.34.1). Yet he has done something, Seneca responds, in graciously accepting the favor. Equally, while Seneca has used loan transactions as a heuristic (e.g. at 2.18.5; cf. 4.12), he charges the interlocutor with missing the important differences elided by the analogy. He continues:

What I am saying will not seem difficult, although it will at first conflict with your view, if you listen to me with an open mind and recognize that there are more things than there are words. A great many things are without a name, things which we denote without strictly applied terms, but rather with names that are also another's and adapted: We talk of our own foot and the foot of a couch, of a sail, and of a poem, and a hunting dog, a sea dog [i.e. a seal], and the Dog Star. Since we do not have enough words in order to apply a single one to each individual thing, we borrow as often as is needed. Bravery is the virtue that rightly disdains dangers or the knowledge of avoiding, accepting, or inviting dangers. Yet we call brave both a gladiator and a vicious slave, whom rashness drives to contempt of death. Frugality is the knowledge of avoiding unnecessary expenditures or the skill of using private property with moderation. Nevertheless, we call frugal the man of a pusillanimous and limited mind, although there is an absolute difference between the proper measure and stinginess. These are different in essence, but our dearth of vocabulary brings it about that we call the former and the latter "frugal," as both one man is called "brave" who rationally disdains chance happenings and another man who irrationally rushes into danger. Thus a "favor" is both a kind action, as we have said, and the thing itself that is granted by the very action, such as money, a house, and a political position. There is a single name for both, but the meaning and significance are quite different.

Thus pay attention. You already know that I say nothing that your worldview shuns: gratitude is repaid for the favor that the action completes, if we accept that favor graciously. We have not yet repaid that other favor, which is constituted by the object, but we will intend to return it. We have done enough for the favor *qua* intention with our own intention; we owe an object in return for the object. Thus, although we say that he who has accepted a favor graciously has returned the favor, still we obligate him to return something commensurate with what he accepted. Certain things we say are inconsistent with common understanding, and then they come into agreement with it by a different path: We deny that the sage receives injury, yet still, whoever strikes that man with his fist will be charged with damages. We deny that the fool owns anything, and yet we judge guilty of theft whoever steals something from the fool. And we say that everyone is insane, but we do not treat everyone with hellebore. We extend the vote and the dispensing of justice to those very men we call mad.

Quod dico, non uidebitur durum, quamuis primo contra opinionem tuam pugnet, si te commodaueris mihi et cogitaueris plures esse res quam uerba. Ingens copia est rerum sine nomine, quas non propriis adpellationibus notamus, sed alienis commodatisque: pedem et nostrum dicimus et lecti et ueli et carminis, canem et uenaticum et marinum et sidus; quia non sufficimus, ut singulis singula adsignemus, quotiens opus est, mutuamur. Fortitudo est uirtus pericula iuste contemnens aut scientia periculorum repellendorum, excipiendorum, prouocandorum; dicimus tamen et gladiatorem fortem uirum et seruum nequam, quem in contemptum mortis temeritas inpulit. Parsimonia est scientia uitandi sumptus superuacuos aut ars re familiari moderate utendi; parcissimum tamen hominem uocamus pusilli animi et contracti, cum infinitum intersit inter modum et angustias. Haec alia sunt natura, sed efficit inopia sermonis, ut et hunc et illum parcum uocemus, ut et ille fortis dicatur cum ratione fortuita despiciens et hic sine ratione in pericula excurrens. Sic beneficium est et actio, ut diximus, benefica et ipsum, quod datur per illam actionem, ut pecunia, ut domus, ut praetexta; unum utrique nomen est, uis quidem ac potestas longe alia.

Itaque adtende, iam intellegis nihil me, quod opinio tua refugiat, dicere: illi beneficio, quod actio perficit, relata gratia est, si illud beneuole excipimus; illud alterum, quod re continetur, nondum reddidimus, sed uolumus reddere. Voluntati uoluntate satis fecimus, rei rem debemus. Itaque, quamuis rettulisse illum gratiam dicamus, qui beneficium libenter accipit, iubemus tamen et simile aliquid ei, quod accepit, reddere. A consuetudine quaedam, quae dicimus, abhorrent, deinde alia uia ad consuetudinem redeunt: negamus iniuriam accipere sapientem, tamen, qui illum pugno percusserit, iniuriarum damnabitur; negamus stulti quidquam esse, et tamen eum, qui rem aliquam stulto subripuit, furti condemnabimus; insanire omnes dicimus, nec omnes curamus elleboro; his ipsis, quos uocamus insanos, et suffragium et iuris dictionem conmittimus. (2.34.2-35.2)

In the immediate context of *On Favors*, Seneca draws these points out to show how he commits no mere linguistic slight of hand in reframing “favor” as a particular sort of action characterized by the intent behind it. He does not simply redefine “favor,” for he explicitly recognizes the term’s applicability to the gifted object itself (*beneficium... ipsum, quod datur per illam actionem*).³⁶ This does not cease to be a meaningful or even legitimate use of the word, even as it may not be its “strict” (*proprius*) usage. Yet, Seneca emphasizes that the concept behind a “favor” as the exchanged object misses something crucial to our idea of what it is to do a favor, viz. the giver’s intent. What makes a true favor a favor, Seneca argues, is that the bene-

³⁶ Insofar as I take *Ben.* 2.34-35 as a programmatic discussion of Senecan thought and methodology, I disagree with Roller (2001) 81 when he suggests that Seneca “eliminates the enacted usage” of the words he repurposes for Stoic ends. However, Roller (2001) 75-77 does recognize that Seneca often operates within the “common-sense” mode of language used by his non-Stoic interlocutors, although he ascribes it to a rhetorical effect that forgoes philosophical rigor, while I argue it has a philosophical rationale for its “loose” use of terminology.

factor expects nothing in return. Indeed, we recognize this fact through naturally distinguishing between doing a favor and making a trade or doing business (2.31.2).³⁷ A true favor occurs when one gives something only with the goal of benefiting and pleasing the recipient, and hence wishes only to see these reflected in the recipient's acceptance (2.31.1-2). Hence, one has repaid the favor itself by graciously accepting it, for in doing this, one does one's part in completely fulfilling the giver's aims. Our concept of a favor *qua* object helps account for our intuition that being granted a favor involves some obligation of return, but it confuses this with the essential act of benefaction itself. While Seneca recognizes that in using "favor" as he does in its Stoic sense he speaks in a way contrary to how we often understand the word (cf. *contra opinionem tuam pugnet* and *a consuetudine quaedam, quae dicimus, abhorrent*), he nonetheless has taken pains to demonstrate that he instead uses "favor" in a less obvious but still recognizably fitting way, as illustrated, e.g., by our recognition that intent matters and through our natural distinction between business and benefaction.³⁸

But Seneca does not limit this passage to just the idea of favors. Conceptual paradoxicality as a whole and, in particular, Stoic paradoxes arise from language's polysemy. But not all polysemy creates the sort of conceptual confusion that underlies the paradoxicality of Stoic claims and the disorder in our worldview that constitutes our ignorance and manifests in our unhappy turmoil. Seneca begins *Ben.* 2.34-35 with the easy illustration of homonymy.³⁹ We use the term *pes* and *canis* to refer to numerous, clearly distinct entities. But as Seneca recognizes elsewhere, no one conflates their own foot with the foot of a couch, except when

³⁷ Cf. *Ep.* 81.9.

³⁸ It would seem that this effort serves as an important stylistic justification, as well as an ethical and philosophical one, for in *Ep.* 114, Seneca sharply criticizes Maecenas' poetry for using language in a way "contrary to any *consuetudo*" (7.3), such as in, e.g., *amne silvisque ripa comantibus* (5.1) or *focum mater aut uxor investiunt* (5.8), where, I take it, *comantibus* and *investiunt* are used in an excessively metaphorical sense.

³⁹ Griffin (2013) 204.

abstracted argumentation exploits linguistic ambiguity and obscures the obvious.⁴⁰ Despite the identity of the signifying word, everyone has a clear idea of a human foot and how it differs from the foot of a couch. The concepts behind the word may overlap, for some similarity presumably explains the homonymy, but they are sharply enough distinguished in the mind, at least relative to each other, to eliminate any risk of misidentification. Instead, Seneca attends singularly to the sorts of words with which we are prone to misidentify and obscure distinct things, especially those of great ethical importance. He moves quickly from the illustrative yet indisputable homonymies to our highly problematic ethical muddling.

Despite, for example, calling both the sage and a gladiator “brave,” what we are actually identifying in either, whether we know it or not, differs “in essence” (*natura*). Unsurprisingly, Seneca correlates this essential difference with virtue or vice: bravery is a virtue (*virtus*) and a body of knowledge (*scientia*), and the brave acts rightly (*iuste* and *cum ratione*), while the merely rash goes wrong (*sine ratione*). Yet our apparently inevitable (cf. *efficit inopia sermonis ut...*) polysemic use of *fortitudo* is not unfounded, due to an overlap in the distinct underlying notions. Both types of bravery involve a devaluation of death and harm (cf. the sage’s *pericula contemnens* and the fool’s *contemptum mortis*), but, like benefaction, we, at least the perceptive “we” of this passage, equally recognize the saliency of why and how this devaluation and its enactment arose. This highlights the danger in an ignorance that confuses such conceptual overlap with identity. If we hastily view the gladiator or slave as “brave” in facing his own death, we risk mistaking vice for virtue. Seneca incisively captures the paradox in ascribing clear-minded bravery to the man whose very foolhardiness and impetuousness (*temeritas*) compel his “brave” action. We think a vicious slave (*servum nequam*) virtuous. In failing to recognize the essential differences in our notions of bravery, not only do we see recklessness

⁴⁰ E.g. *Ep.* 45.5-9 and *Ep.* 48.6.

as its opposite, but we risk further confusion through faulty conceptualization. In seeing the vicious gladiator as brave, we fail to recognize that instead of manifesting any sort of active vigor in the face of death, which guides even our colloquial attribution of bravery (cf. *hic sine ratione in pericula excurrans*), the gladiator is in fact passively driven (cf. *quem temeritas inpulit*) into his supposed bravery. In the ethical domain at least, our conceptions of qualities like bravery and recklessness are not just often identified by the same name, but are also poorly understood and deficiently differentiated.

Misled by certain salient similarities between two matters, we fail to fully grasp their categorically distinct natures. In *Ep.* 45, Seneca condemns Lucilius' apparent interest in logical puzzles and declares that "our minds must come to deem it necessary to take heed lest matters, not just words, deceive us... Things fool us: discern those" (*tota illo mente pergendum est ubi provideri debet ne res nos, non verba decipiant... res fallunt: illas discernere*; 5.5-6.3). And Seneca links this deception to the sort of normative corruption tied up with our polysemic language described in *Ben.* 2.34-35 above:

How similar flattery is to friendship! Not only does it impersonate friendship but bests it and surpasses it. It is received by ready and welcoming ears and strikes deep in the heart [*in praecordia ima descendit*], pleasing to the very extent that it harms: teach me how I can identify this imitation [*similitudinem*]. A flattering enemy comes to me instead of a friend. The vices [*vitia*] creep into us under the names of virtue: rashness [*temeritas*] escapes notice [*latet*] under the term "bravery"; apathy is called moderation; and the coward is taken as cautious. In these matters we error at our own great risk: stamp reliable indicators on these [*his certas notas inprime*]. (*Ep.* 45.7)

While in *Ben.* 2.34-35, Seneca seems to simply accept the ambiguous terminology that denotes ostensibly similar virtues and vices as a feature of the limited Latin vocabulary, here misleading polysemy directly reflects ignorance. Yet, Seneca is unconcerned with terminolog-

ical precision *per se*, at least in this context.⁴¹ Polysemy need not reflect nor necessitate conceptual ambiguity: whether our language itself is precise or not, it primarily matters that we understand the nature of the entity we take a word to indicate (cf. “let us evaluate each thing unprejudiced [*remota*] by its reputation, and let us seek what it is, not what it is called”; *Ep.* 95.54.5-6). Seneca doesn’t decry polysemy itself, only the ethical confusion that polysemy reveals. We do not know the difference between certain vices and virtues and thus conceive of them as the same thing. As a result, we mistake the former for the latter. That we call rashness “bravery,” apathy “moderation,” and cowardice “caution” matters because it reflects our ignorance of their difference (cf. *obreptunt*, *latet*, and *erramus*), not our malicious intent to dissimulate.⁴² We do not equivocate because we are vicious, but we become (more) vicious and remain vicious because we do not recognize our equivocation. Seneca doesn’t demand *certa verba*, but *certae notae*, for we need a reliable way to recognize, say, recklessness as distinct from bravery, and studying and refining words before we have a solid grasp of the matters they are supposed to refer to at best obscures if not distracts from that end.⁴³

The paradoxicality of Seneca’s Stoic claims, at least at first, arises not just as a result of our conflation of two distinct conceptions, but also, just as importantly, from our precipitate inability and unwillingness to stop for a second and consider what is really being said. The most surprising element of *Ben.* 2.34-35 isn’t that Seneca suggests we fail to properly distinguish between two nominally identical notions, but that he presents this failure as one of carelessness and hastiness in judgment rather than ignorance of the relevant facts. Both

⁴¹ Cf. *Ep.* 89.9, where Seneca identifies the philosophical domain of logic (*rationalis*; 2) as that study which “examines the proper significations of words, logical structure, and argumentation, lest falsehoods creep in in place of the truth” (*proprietas verborum exigit et structuram et argumentationes, ne pro vero falsa subreant*; 3-5, cf. *Ep.* 90.29).

⁴² At least this is not the problem Seneca has in mind here, elsewhere he does contend with willful dissimulation (e.g. at *N.Q.* 4a.praef.14-19).

⁴³ On *notae* as conceptions, see, e.g., *Ep.* 95.67, cf. *notio* throughout *Ep.* 120. On this, see Wildberger (2006a) and Inwood (2005a).

§34 and §35 begin with an admonition to listen and think carefully together with the explicit, Socratic thrust that the interlocutor Liberalis (and the reader) in fact *already* knows what Seneca claims (cf. *non videbitur durum* and esp. *iam intellegis*). As Socrates tells Polus in the *Gorgias*, Seneca contends that Liberalis really believes, specifically, that one repays a favor simply by accepting it graciously. Liberalis does not consciously hold this belief, indeed, as Seneca recognizes he expressly holds its contrary (*quamvis primo contra opinionem tuam pugnet*), but he fails to see that his worldview includes the beliefs about what a favor involves that justify Seneca's paradox. Akin to the Socratic paradox of the *Gorgias*, the conceptual paradoxes of *Ben.* 2.34-35 are both substantive paradoxes – they really do conflict with some element of the reader's worldview – and also superficial paradoxes – once considered, their coherence, at least partial, reveals itself. Resolving these Stoic paradoxes, then, involves carefully and unprecipitately getting clear about what the conceptions that make up our worldview entail, and this will involve refining these conceptions relative to the language we use to convey them (“What *res* do I refer to with the word ‘favor’?”) and relative to each other and the *res* these signify (“How is ‘favor’ *qua* action alike or distinct from ‘favor’ *qua* object?”). As certain commitments that lead to paradox are rejected, we come to see that our worldviews supported the acceptance of the Stoic paradoxes all along. Seneca demands such a process from Liberalis and us readers as he calms our hastiness at the openings of §34 and §35 in Book Two of *On Favors*.

Thus far, I have used the notions of a “concept” or “conception” in a fairly broad, open, and colloquial sense. This use has suited the Stoic's own theory, but we need to get clearer about this in order to understand why Seneca states so confidently that Stoic para-

doxes in fact accord with our *consuetudo* at *Ben.* 2.35.2.1-2.⁴⁴ On the one hand, this may seem like a fairly straightforward remark. Griffin suggests that it is a “point about [the Stoics’] unusual use of language not leading to different conclusions from the ordinary usage.”⁴⁵ Hence even as a Stoic thinks only the sage is, strictly speaking, sane, he nonetheless continues to distinguish the fool’s “insanity” from that of colloquial, “clinical” insanity and acts accordingly (2.35.2.6-8). On the other hand, while certainly true, this limited interpretation obscures the deeper more puzzling implication of the entire passage, viz. that even as we are misled by language and confused conceptions, we non-Stoics are in some way already committed to these paradoxical truths.⁴⁶ And thus to come to see the (partly) superficial paradoxicality of these Stoic claims, we need not wholly reject our present worldview or the actions that flow from it. As such, we will still, as Seneca suggests, charge criminals with theft, on account of certain retained ordinary views concerning property, even as we equally come to clarify a stricter sense of ownership that follows from other beliefs within our worldview, which ultimately limits property, strictly speaking as the Stoics conceive of it, to the sage (2.35.2.4-6). This is a much stronger claim than Griffin’s weaker form, and it is rather surprising: why think that, in some sense, we’ve believed these Stoic positions all along? Seneca’s certainty lies, I suggest, in the Stoic theory of “conceptions.”

In Stoicism, the human mind as a whole reasons: it operates via logical inference, and each of its movements qualifies as a thought with a conceptual-linguistic counterpart. Thinking involves the reasoner’s body of “conceptions” (ἐννοιαί) or, as a subspecies, “preconcep-

⁴⁴ Cf. Griffin (2013) 204-205. Griffin links Seneca’s use of paradox to that of hyperbole, which Seneca says at *Ben.* 7.22 offers a certain pedagogical efficacy ((2013) 110, 205 and (1976) 306), but this misleadingly suggests that Seneca doesn’t think the paradoxes accurate and precisely true.

⁴⁵ Griffin (2013) 204.

⁴⁶ Griffin’s interpretation (2013) 204-205 arises from the accurate observation that Seneca uses this discussion to emphasize that even if we accept the Stoic paradox concerning gratitude as a favor’s repayment, this will not stop us from still returning the favor in a material sense if possible (2.35.3-5).

tions” (προλήψεις).⁴⁷ These conceptions constitute the way we categorize our experience of the cosmos. So, for example, we see a particular human as a human on account of our conception of “human,” which encapsulates the general features and qualities we take to be a part of what it is to be human; that is, how we conceptualize humanness. Conceptions are the basic coinage, so to speak, of human reason, and a young child’s development of a body of conceptions constitutes her development into a reasoner.⁴⁸ In our childhoods, our minds naturally construct conceptions out of the repetition of our pre-rational impressions involving the conception’s referent, and we put a name to these conceptions as our guardians point these referents out. We begin with simple conceptions: so, for example, our minds naturally develop the conception of “white” from repeated exposure to white objects and its linkage to the linguistic term “white.”⁴⁹ Thankfully, barring some sort of abnormal situation, our minds naturally and accurately form a great many “common conceptions” (κοινὰ ἔννοιαι).⁵⁰ So, for example, all but the most impaired humans develop the same basic conception of “white.” With these basic conceptions, our rationality takes hold, and from these simpler conceptions, both from repeated experience and inferential thinking,⁵¹ we develop ever more complex ones, such as “man,” which itself involves other conceptions, such as “animal,” “two-legged,” and so on. Thus as we learn and form additional commitments, we build webs

⁴⁷ Scholars debate the precise distinction between conceptions and preconceptions. See, e.g., Doty (1976), Dyson (2009), Sandbach (1971), Brittain (2005) 168-179 and Vogt (2007) 161. On preconceptions in Seneca in particular, see Orlando (2014). I assume only that preconceptions are the first conceptions we come to have and that they are in some way less developed and thus come to be, on further refinement, conceptions proper.

⁴⁸ Aetius 4.11.1-4 (=LS 39E); Cicero, *Acad.* 2.21 (=LS 39C); and Galen, *Plac.* 5.3.1 (=LS 53V).

⁴⁹ Cicero, *Acad.* 2.30-1 (=LS 40N) and Diogenes Laertius 7.53 (=LS 39D).

⁵⁰ Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1059B-1060A and Alexander, *Mixt.* 217.2-4. On the possible differences between common conceptions and (pre)conceptions, see Brittain (2005), Obbink (1992), and Jackson-McCabe (2004).

⁵¹ Cicero, *Acad.* 2.21 (=LS 39C).

of logically related conceptions and the commitments that inform them and follow from them; and we interpret and reason about the world via these different conceptual nexuses.⁵²

Herein lies the essential Stoic view that justifies Seneca's certainty in *Ben.* 2.35.2.1-2. As humans, our minds are naturally predisposed to form certain basic conceptions, called "preconceptions," concerning certain features of the world.⁵³ And while we may and indeed almost inevitably will make mistakes as we develop these preconceptions into fuller conceptions, on account of the providential arrangement of the cosmos, we will naturally develop (Stoically) accurate preconceptions. In these naturally arising, accurate preconceptions, nature provides us a sure foundation upon which to build a knowledgeable worldview.⁵⁴ These are the "seeds of knowledge" (*semina scientiae*) that Seneca references in *Ep.* 120.⁵⁵ But they are only seeds. Society's corruption, our own predisposition towards deception, and our cognitive hastiness salt the soil, so to speak, such that many of these accurate conceptions are mixed up with inaccurate others, and, despite retaining their initial true elements, are themselves perverted. Take the preconception of goodness. Everyone, the Stoics say, conceives of the good as what benefits, and this is true.⁵⁶ But, in our foolishness, we go on to

⁵² As Vogt (2007) 161 points out, the exact nature of conceptions and their relationship with beliefs or knowledge is not perfectly clear from the Stoic sources. It seems unlikely that all commitments alter a conception. Why should the belief that "this cat's name is Theodore" change one's conception of "cat," for what a cat might be named seems unessential to what it is to be a cat? Yet a commitment to "this cat has three legs" does seem important and likely to be reflected in one's conception of "cat," viz. in qualifying the essential four-leggedness of the creature. Moreover, the generic commitment that "cats usually have four legs" certainly has an essential relationship to one's conception of "cat," not as a part of the conception itself (since a conception is not itself a commitment, but one of its components [see Frede (1987) 154-155]), but as a part of the definition of "cat" that shapes in a certain way its conception. On the relationship between definitions and conceptions, see Brittain (2005).

⁵³ See Galen, *Plac.* 4.11.3-4. Cf. *Ep.* 120 and Seneca's singular use of *praesumptio* (=πρόληψις) at *Ep.* 117.6, on which see Setaioli (2007) 336, Inwood (2007b) 283-283, and Orlando (2014).

⁵⁴ Cf. Frede (1987).

⁵⁵ On the philosophical concerns of this letter, see Inwood (2005a).

⁵⁶ E.g., Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 11.22-26 (=LS 60G) and Seneca, *Ep.* 87.36-37, with Inwood (2005a), Vogt (2007), and Frede (1999a). On the Stoic methodology of beginning their proofs for their paradoxical claims with premises based on commonly accepted conceptions, see Long (1996b) 139 and Inwood (1995) 248-250. On this methodology in Seneca, see Roller (2001) 73-77 and 97-124.

add any number of errors to this conception (such as adding “what gives pleasure”) or, perhaps, we erroneously link it with other conceptions (such as tying up our conceptions of luxury and wealth with what we conceive as good).⁵⁷ Despite all this, though, those tiny seeds of truth remain in our worldviews.⁵⁸

The Stoics of course hold that they have built the Stoic system from the foundation of these accurate preconceptions.⁵⁹ Epistemologically, this gives their system a stable grounding, as these preconceptions’ providentially secured grasp of the truth serve as criteria of truth alongside, or, technically speaking, as part of kataleptic impressions and the resulting cognitions.⁶⁰ But just as importantly for our purposes, this origin of reason and of the basic framework of our worldview justifies the Stoics’ “meta”-paradoxical claim that the Stoic paradoxes are not really or fully paradoxical after all, but only seem so because of the confusion and obscurity in our ignorance.⁶¹ This psychological development story about preconceptions is descriptive, and, the Stoic account goes, as rational adults we hold, as a matter of fact, the relevant basic commitments that logically lead to the Stoic system.⁶² It is this Stoic truth that Seneca relies on in his claim that we readers and Liberalis already hold his paradoxical remarks to be true, even as they appear paradoxical relative to certain views we have.

⁵⁷ Epictetus puts this in term of misapplication, leaving the preconception of good as benefit unsullied but obscured (*Diss.* 1.22.9-10), but it is unclear if this is how earlier Stoics considered them (cf. Dyson (2009) 1-22).

⁵⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 97.12.1-3: “In any case, in order that you may know that there is a sense of the good in those minds that have been led even into the worst affairs and that these minds are not ignorant of it but rather shamefully disregard it, [know that] all men hide their misdeeds...” (*Aliquin, ut scias subesse animis etiam in pessima abductis boni sensum nec ignorari turpe sed neglegi, omnes peccata dissimulant...*).

⁵⁹ Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1060a (=LS 40R).

⁶⁰ Cicero, *Acad.* 2.22 (=LS 40M), 2.30-31 (=LS 40N), and Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1060a (=LS 40R). On this, see esp. Frede (1987).

⁶¹ Cf., e.g., Cicero, *Par. Sto.* 5.35.

⁶² Cf. Cicero’s claim at *Tusc.* 4.53.16-20: “Although it pleases us to attack those men [the Stoics], as Carneades was wont to do, I fear that they alone are philosophers. For which of those definitions [of bravery] does not reveal our conception [*notionem*], which we all have of bravery, though one obscured [*tectam*] and enshrouded [*involutam*]?”

These claims fly in the face of some facets of our customary way of speaking and thinking about the world – our *consuetudo* – but nonetheless accord with other and, the Stoics argue, most foundational elements of it.

Even as our worldviews then, as a matter of natural fact, include a conceptual framework that at its foundation supports the Stoic position, they also include any number of competing and overlapping frameworks. In our ignorance we have both formed inaccurate conceptions, confused distinct conceptions, and in our hasty thinking drawn faulty links between different conceptions, resulting in the confusion, instability, and inconsistency that constitutes our ignorance and its worldview. Just as importantly, having a conception of something doesn't mean that we can necessarily articulate its content. So, for example, even a newly rational child will soon form a conception of "human" such that he can recognize a human and think about them. But he likely will be unable to define "human," which is to say, spell out the content of his conception. This heavily drives, I take it, our proclivity to conflate and blur distinct conceptions. As Seneca points out, we (he assumes) do recognize a conceptual difference between the bravery of the sage and the "brave" recklessness of the gladiator, but we have failed to carefully consider this fact and clarify our conceptions. Thus our worldviews fail to reliably distinguish between the two. Moreover, our *consuetudo* includes not only ways of conceptualizing the world, but, equally, how we speak about it, including to ourselves in our own thoughts (since, for the Stoics, thinking simply is internal speech).⁶³ Due to the putative linguistic poverty of Latin, any given *verbum*, in signifying multiple, categorically distinct *res*, signifies multiple conceptions, further adding to the possibility and reality of conceptual confusion within our worldviews. When our worldviews contain only hazily distinct conceptions of bravery and recklessness, thinking of them both as "bravery" comes

⁶³ Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 8.275-276 (=LS 53T) and Galen, *Plac.* 2.5.9-13 (=LS 53U), cf. *Ep.* 117.13.

naturally but nonetheless further obscures the distinction. Thus, conceptual paradox, as we have seen in *Ben.* 2.34-35, arises when some claim (or idea, word, or figure of speech, since these work in the same way) seems to contradict our worldview. But, these paradoxes reveal the conceptual confusion and inconsistency in our worldviews. Resolution, as Seneca demonstrates and drives home, requires us to clarify the nature of some types of *res* conceptualized and drawn to mind by its indicative *verbum* in a context or as part of a claim that surprises us and strikes us as untrue.⁶⁴

When we put Seneca's discussion of paradox in *Ben.* 2.34-35 in these terms, it may surprise us that Seneca explicitly problematizes the philosophical study of *verba*. Of course, it makes sense that Seneca should warn against confusing the, as it were, purely philological study of language – “What are the different meanings of ‘*amicus*?’” (*Ep.* 48.4) – with the philosophical study of what matter we *intend* to indicate with such language – “What should we call an ‘*amicus*?’” (*Ep.* 48.2-3). But wouldn't it be philosophically productive to attend to or create specialized language that helps identify and separate the easily confused conceptions within our worldviews? This impulse presumably lies behind the Stoics' penchant for neologisms.⁶⁵ For in distinguishing between, say, “value” (ἄξια) and “goodness” (ἀγαθόν), the Stoics help crystallize a fundamentally important conceptual difference between the positive valence of indifferents such as wealth and health and that of virtue.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Of course, as we have seen, the assurance of resolution and acceptance rests on Stoic epistemological, theological, and cosmological assertions. But even if we should deny such assertions, justified rejection of such paradoxes would require the same conceptual clarification or, at least, specification.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1068d-1070b; Galen *Inst. Log.* 3.2 and *Meth. Med.* 10.55k; and Cicero, *Fin.* 5.89. Cf. Atherton (1993) 116-118.

⁶⁶ E.g., Diogenes Laertius 7.101-103 (=LS 58A) and Stobaeus 2.83.10-84.2 (=LS 58D).

In this light, Seneca's tendency to consciously eschew such terminological precision and innovation may seem un-Stoic.⁶⁷ Compare Cicero's discussion of the Stoic concept of bravery (*fortitudo*) with Seneca's in *Ben.* 2.34:

He who is brave likewise has faith in himself [*fidens*], since although "being confident" [*confidens*] denotes a vice through a faulty manner of speaking [*mala consuetudine loquendi*], it is a word derived from *confidere*, which is an indication of approval. Yet whoever has faith in himself, he certainly does not feel fear, for being confident is inconsistent [*discrepat*] with being afraid. (*Tusc.* 3.14.1-4)

Cicero goes on to show how being susceptible to fear opens one to submission (*serviat*; 14.10) and an admission of defeat (*victum... se esse fateatur*; 14.10-11), which does not occur for the *confidens*.⁶⁸ Concerning language, Cicero makes a similar point to Seneca's. We use the word *confidens* to refer to two different states, the justified and virtuous self-assurance of the sage and the vicious self-assurance of the fool that often amounts to unjustified arrogance.⁶⁹ Yet in so far as we intend to indicate a state of mind that truly approves of itself or is something truly praiseworthy, we err in describing anyone but the sage as *confidens*. Cicero, however, seems to rule out any justifiable use of *confidens* for a differently conceived notion of confidence. To apply the term *confidens* to a vicious mind is simply an erroneous way of speaking (*mala consuetudine loquendi*), since the word itself implies certain things, viz. approval.⁷⁰ There is only one legitimate conception that corresponds to *confidens*, and it is of a characteristic of the sage.⁷¹ In *Ben.* 2.34-35, on the other hand, Seneca's approach differs. He certainly recognizes

⁶⁷ Consider the beginning of *Ep.* 59, where Seneca brings up the conceptual distinction underlying the Stoic terminology of "pleasure" (*voluptas*) versus "joy" (*gaudium*), only to set it aside, at least for some of the letter. On some rhetorical and pedagogical reasons for such terminological "looseness," see Roller (2001) 75-77, Inwood (2005d), and Habinek (1989) 241-245.

⁶⁸ On this section of the *Tusculan Disputations*, see Graver (2002) 85-90.

⁶⁹ The Loeb edition of the *Tusculan Disputations* astutely points out that the titular character in Terence's *Phormio* is called a *homo confidens*.

⁷⁰ Cf. Cicero's justification of the various definitions of the virtues based on etymologies at *Tusc.* 3.17-18.

⁷¹ This is not something uniquely Ciceronian, but rather, it seems, what Cicero takes to be a Stoic position (3.13; cf. *Fin.* 3.75). Elsewhere, in the *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, where Cicero deals with Stoic ideas but in a way distanced from the "Stoic" manner of speaking (cf. *Stoice solet*; §1), Cicero uses a single term in a number of differ-

strict uses of words (cf. *propriis*; 34.2.4), but he leaves language's polysemy intact and doesn't, for example, ascribe a new word to *beneficia qua* favored item, even as he stakes out a new, "proper" Stoic use for the word.⁷² Moreover, his discussion of *fortitudo* suggests that one cannot rule out its customary use as *mala* since it does capture a certain conception of *fortitudo*, viz. as *temeritas* that involves a devaluation of death, which shares features with the Stoic conception even as it is essentially different. Seneca focuses his attention and admonition on clarifying the conceptions that our (necessarily) polysemic language signifies, and thus for the most part works within the confines of the terminology available to him, leaving much of linguistic *consuetudo* alone, even as he alters the conceptual apparatus behind it. Indeed, in so far as Seneca seeks to demonstrate that the Stoic positions, paradoxical as they may seem, actually cohere in important ways with our worldview (our *consuetudo* in a broader sense), to fundamentally shift the way we use our language may undermine that message, especially to those untrained and incredulous readers at which many of Seneca's works aim.⁷³

However, in working within the linguistic *consuetudo* of his interlocutors, readers, and contemporary society at large, Seneca reflects an approach that was likely justifiable for Stoic writers at least as far back as Chrysippus.⁷⁴ Plutarch tells us that Chrysippus allows:

If someone wishes to call some of these [valuable or disvaluable indifferents] good and others bad in accordance with their actual differences [κατὰ τὰς τοιαύτας

ent, though related, ways. Cicero may, of course, be wrong in what he takes to be the Stoic mode (cf. Schofield (1983)), although it seems to me likely that, even so, he represents the common opinion of his time. Atherton (1993) 116-117 takes the inclusion of the traditional usage of words within the Stoic disambiguations of, e.g., value and slavery to indicate at least that "ordinary significations of terms are not unworthy of attention" for the Stoics.

⁷² For other instances of such verbal *proprietas* in Seneca, see *Ep.* 3.1, *Ep.* 58.11, *Ep.* 59.3, *Ep.* 81.9, *Ep.* 88.42, 89.9, *N.Q.* 3.18.7, *Ben.* 2.27.1, and 4.27.4.

⁷³ Consider the prominent objections that the Stoics vacuously redefine words to justify their philosophy in Alexander, *Top.* 301.19 and Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 21.1068d-107b.

⁷⁴ Long and Sedley (1987) I 436 suggest that Chrysippus eased up on the supposed terminological strictness of Zeno. This is supported by Diogenes Laertius' discussion on Chrysippus engagement with Zenonian terminology in his *On Zeno's Proper Use of Terminology* (7.121-122 [=LS 67M]). Inwood (2007b) 290 discusses this in relation to a similar claim by Seneca in *Ep.* 117.3.

παράλλαξις], referring to these matters [τὰ πράγματα] and not making any sort of mistake, then it should be allowed because he is not making a mistake in what is signified [ἐν μὲν τοῖς σημαινόμενοις] and for other reasons aims at the customary use of words [τὰς ὀνομασίας συνηθείας]. (qtd. in Plutarch, *St. rep.* 1048a)

The value of the matters that concern our decision making, such as health, sickness, and reputation, differs fundamentally from the value of virtue and vice. Yet, even as they are incommensurate, Chrysippus here emphasizes that the Stoics employ the linguistic distinction between, e.g., “preferred” (προημένον) and “good” (ἀγαθόν) for the sake of aiding our ability to accurately identify such different matters (τὰ πράγματα).⁷⁵ So long as a speaker knows what it is she signifies and does so rightly, her terminology is permissible. Chrysippus’ reference to συνήθεια is striking, as it is the Greek cognate to Seneca’s Latin *consuetudo*. The Stoic of this passage, of course, importantly diverges from a certain customary way of conceiving of what is good and bad, for his conception of goodness includes only virtue, while a distinct conception of value includes the indifferents, even as he uses the colloquial term *agathos* to refer to both. Chrysippus doesn’t specify whether this Stoic speaks in this way in his everyday life or in his capacity as a teacher, and without knowing this, it is unclear why he aims at using customary vocabulary. As general practice, on the one hand, we might imagine this allows him to be comprehensible to (and tolerated by) his non-Stoic fellows and thus more easily navigate a world full of fools. As a teacher, on the other hand, this adaptation offers him the means to meet his students at their own level and to focus on their understanding of the matter itself – what it is the terminology signifies – without needing to immediately add the possibly obfuscating or objectionable terminological apparatus. Seneca, I think, would

⁷⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 74.17.1-3: “Other matter are ‘goods’ only by belief and though they have a name in common with true goods, the essence of goodness is not in them. Thus let them be called ‘advantages’ and, in order to use our terminology, ‘preferables’” (*Cetera opinione bona sunt et nomen quidem habent commune cum veris, proprietas in illis boni non est; itaque commoda vocentur et, ut nostra lingua loquar, producta*).

welcome both aims.⁷⁶ For now, though, I want to suggest that we can see best how Seneca adapts this approach to linguistic *consuetudo* and its theoretical underpinnings within his broader aims of (Stoic) paradox resolution and integrating the confused and conflated conceptions within our worldview (i.e. *consuetudo*) by investigating a certain sort of linguistic paradox favored by Seneca: the “semantic” paradox.

(B) “Semantic” paradox

A semantic paradox rests explicitly on linguistic equivocation, conflation, or juxtaposition, and includes such figures as the oxymoron and pun: so, for instance, the remark that one can “be busy doing nothing” or to speak of “deafening silence.” Assuming such paradoxes are in fact resolvable, the famous contradictory statements by, e.g., Heraclitus fall within this category.⁷⁷ Seneca famously employs semantic paradoxes throughout his works, claiming, for example, at the end of the last extant letter, “you will have mastery of yourself when you know that the most unfortunate are fortunate” (*tunc habebis tuum cum intelleges infelicitissimos esse felices*; *Ep.* 124.24.5-6).⁷⁸ Seneca’s semantic paradoxes often take this sort of oxymoronic form, but the linguistic equivocation need not be so spelled out, as in *Ep.* 23.11, where Seneca warns Lucilius that “certain men only truly begin [to live] when they must

⁷⁶ For example, this would fit well within Seneca’s advice to Lucilius in *Ep.* 5 to ostensibly live like those around them even as their inner lives and the actions that flow from them are radically different. Cf. Roller (2001) 75-77 and Inwood (2007b) 290.

⁷⁷ Compare other such semantic paradoxes in Section III of Chapter One.

⁷⁸ For scholarship that focuses primarily on such paradoxes in Seneca, see, e.g., Mader (1982), Stewart (1997), Lavary (1987), Moretti (1995), and Williams (2015b) 146-147. Traina (1974) 35 also speaks of “semantic” paradoxes in Seneca, although his notion of “semantico” has greater breadth than mine and includes what would fall under the heading of conceptual paradox in my schema. Thus, e.g., Traina calls Seneca’s remark that *non vixit iste, sed in vita moratus est, nec sero mortuus est, sed diu* [*Ep.* 93.3] semantic, since the adverb denoting duration, *diu*, is incongruous with the momentary action denoted by the verb *mortuus est*. However, Traina’s observation that the perfect tense of *mortuus est* (rather than the imperfect) heightens the paradoxicality offers a point of overlap between our homonymous categories. On the stylistics of Senecan paradox in general, see Traina (1974) 83, 96-97, and 111-112.

stop. If you think this paradoxical, I will add what you will find more so: certain men cease living before they have begun” (*quidam vero tunc incipiunt cum desinendum est. Si hoc iudicas mirum, adiciam quod magis admireris: quidam ante vivere desierunt quam inciperent*; 2-4).⁷⁹

Scholars have often noted that Senecan paradox subverts our expectations so that we reconsider our own beliefs and, ideally, come to recognize their error and reject them in favor of the Stoic position.⁸⁰ Matthew Roller, for example, writes that the resolution of Senecan and Stoic paradoxes “provides the occasion for introducing Stoic ethical concepts over against traditional ones,” which serves as an essential part of “an argumentative strategy that seeks ultimately to nuance or even displace these very [traditional] views.”⁸¹ Gottfried Mader puts it more starkly:

Basic to Stoic moral philosophy is the assumption that there are two opposing value scales: at the pinnacle of the Stoic ethical hierarchy – which we shall term the ‘spiritual’ scale – stands *virtus*, possession of which renders the *sapiens* both happy and self-sufficient; opposed to this is what we may call the ‘material’ scale comprising the external goods, which by their very nature are antagonistic to the philosophical and abstract ideals of the former. In terms of this scheme paradox may be described as a process in which a word passes from the ‘material’ to the ‘spiritual’ scale; this entails a semantic shift from concrete to abstract... The precise meaning of the word, whether concrete or abstract, is therefore relative to and determined by the user’s material or spiritual values and preoccupations.⁸²

Mader describes these two scales – material vs. spiritual – as two distinct “framework[s] of reference,” one which the fool holds, the other the sage, through which, e.g., “wealth” means gold to the latter and wisdom to the former.⁸³ The scholars who accept this picture of

⁷⁹ Seneca shapes the *De Brevitate Animi* around this conceptual distinction between “living” (*vivere*) and merely “existing” (*esse*) (cf. Williams (2003)).

⁸⁰ Mader (1982) 72 succinctly captures the prevailing idea: “[Stoic] paradox is a striking vehicle of expression which challenges the reader to reflect on the underlying philosophical questions, assumptions and implicit comparisons.” Cf. esp. Mader (1982), Stewart (1997), Lavary (1987), Schofield (1983), Lefèvre (1970) 69-74, Motto and Clark (1975), and Graver (1996) 116.

⁸¹ Roller (2001) 74 and 77.

⁸² Mader (1982) 71.

⁸³ Mader (1982) 71.

a radical conceptual alteration effected by full resolution of Stoic paradoxes are in many ways quite right. Coming to see only virtue as good would, as the Stoics gladly acknowledge, fundamentally change one's worldview and life, and coming to this view would involve ridding oneself of the many beliefs about what is good.⁸⁴ But I want to warn against presenting these conceptual changes as “displacement” or of an essential “antagonism” between the conceptual framework of the fool and of the sage.⁸⁵ If what I have argued in this chapter is true, Seneca sees this conceptual change not as wholesale uprooting of mutual-exclusive conceptions, but as a clarification and disambiguation of now incongruous but, once refined, complementary ideas. The two evaluative perspectives Mader speaks of would be antagonistic so long as one's conception of goodness still confuses it with value, but they complement each other when that confusion is cleared up. In other words, the sage wouldn't give up the perspective through which wealth denotes gold when he develops the perspective in which it denotes wisdom. He'd simply recognize that the conception of wealth that links to gold doesn't include *goodness* but only *value*, whereas the conception of wealth as wisdom does.⁸⁶ I suggest, then, that Seneca's use of semantic paradoxes, the very sort Mader explores, demonstrates that Senecan paradox functions by revealing and precipitating the resolution of the incoherent and contradictory conceptions and their broader frameworks within the fool's

⁸⁴ E.g., Cicero, *Fin.* 3.17.20-22 (=LS 59D), cf. Frede (1999a). However, some Stoics, at least, seemed to think that the phenomenology of being all but wise versus truly wise barely differed (Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1062b [=LS 61U]).

⁸⁵ Cf. Cancik's description of Senecan paradox as bringing together the “irreconcilable” (*Unvereinbarem*) (1967) 136 and, esp., Stewart (1997) 10: “My objective in highlighting these various features of Seneca's Stoic doctrine and the Roman values of his time, however, is not merely to show that they are at odds, which is obvious, but rather to point out that the contradiction takes the form of a total inversion... At every point Seneca argues for a position which is exactly the inverse of that which the Roman tradition espoused and that which was held by his contemporaries.”

⁸⁶ So Mader (1982) 71 is at least rather misleading when he writes, “For example, a common word like ‘wealth’ or ‘riches’ will have, in the ‘material’ scale, a concrete value, denoting gold, money or the like; but when the philosopher employs the same term against his own framework of reference – the ‘spiritual’ scale – it will acquire a correspondingly abstract (or metaphorical) meaning and denote what *he* regards as valuable, namely wisdom, virtue and so on. The precise meaning of the word, whether concrete or abstract, is therefore relative to and determined by the user's material or spiritual values and preoccupations” (original emphasis).

ignorant worldview, rather than through effecting a fundamental conceptual displacement and replacement.

In *Ep.* 56, Seneca finds himself renting a room above a noisy bathhouse and describes taking this as an opportunity to train in resisting distraction.⁸⁷ But, as often happens, what begins in a quotidian register soon shifts to the philosophical and ethical:

But now I have hardened myself against all such [noises] to the extent that I am able to hear even the particularly shrill voice of the boatswain as he gives the beat for his rowers. For I force the mind to focus on itself and not to be distracted by what is without. Let everything resound outside, so long as there is no turmoil within, so long as desire and fear do not quarrel amongst themselves, so long as greed and indulgence are not at variance nor one foil the other. For what benefit is total silence, if our emotions rage? ‘All of night was settled in peaceful quiet.’ This is inaccurate: no quiet is peaceful except that made so by reason. Night furnishes annoyance rather than lifting it, and it simply changes what is bothersome. For the dreams of those sleeping are as frenzied as the days: true tranquility is that in which a good mind is arranged. Look at that man for whom sleep is sought by the silence of a spacious home, and, lest any sound disturb his ears, the whole crowd of his slaves are silent and the steps of those passing nearby are placed lightly: yet in fact he rolls about, sleeping lightly amidst his distress – He complains that he has heard what he has not heard. What do you think to be the cause? His mind cries out. This must be calmed. Its rebellion must be staunch. Just because the body is at rest, you should not think that this is at peace: sometimes quiet is unquiet.

Sed iam me sic ad omnia ista duravi ut audire vel pausarium possim voce acerbissima remigibus modos dantem. Animum enim cogo sibi intentum esse nec avocari ad externa; omnia licet foris resonent, dum intus nihil tumultus sit, dum inter se non rixentur cupiditas et timor, dum avaritia luxuria que non dissideant nec altera alteram vexet. Nam quid prodest totius regionis silentium, si adfectus fremunt?

‘Omnia noctis erant placida composta quiete.’

Falsum est: nulla placida est quies nisi quam ratio composuit; nox exhibet molestiam, non tollit, et sollicitudines mutat. Nam dormientium quoque insomnia tam turbulenta sunt quam dies: illa tranquillitas vera est in quam bona mens explicatur. Aspice illum cui somnus laxae domus silentio quaeritur, cuius aures ne quis agitet sonus, omnia servorum turba conticuit et suspensum accedentium propius vestigium ponitur: huc nempe versatur atque illuc, somnum inter aegritudines levem captans; quae non audit audisse se queritur. Quid in causa putas esse? Animus illi obstrepit. Hic placandus est, huius conpscenda seditio est, quem non est quod existimes placidum, si iacet corpus: interdum quies inquieta est. (5.2-8.4)

⁸⁷ On this letter see Chapter One Section III with Henderson (2006) 140-142, Berno (2006), Motto and Clark (1970), and Hönscheid (2004).

Paradox plays numerous roles in this passage, but for now the essential paradox occurs at the end: the semantic paradox that *interdum quies inquieta est*. The resolution of this paradox rests on recognizing the different conceptions of stillness or peace that lie behind our use of the term *quies*.⁸⁸ But, and this is essential, resolution does not leave us with one new conception of *quies* and another old, rejected conception. Instead, we end up with two conceptions we already held in the first place, but which we at first confused in some way and now see (more) clearly.

Throughout this passage, Seneca draws apart a number of concepts that are themselves intertwined in our own worldviews, at the same time as his language keeps them properly tethered behind polysemic terminology. External discord as aural distraction (*avocari* and *resonant*) differs from its internal counterpart as unsettling conflict (*rixentur*, *dissideat*, and *vexet*). Yet though distinct, both remain mentally unsettling *molestiae* and *sollicitudines*, a conceptual link Seneca captures in depicting inner turmoil as an abstract form of aural distraction (*fremunt* and *obstrepit*; cf. external *fremitum* at 3.4). Indeed, the restless man who literally thinks he hears something as a result of his cacophonous mind cleverly reinforces the “acoustic” way we conceive of cogitation (consider the colloquial “voice” in one’s head).⁸⁹ Moreover, within this framing, Seneca distinguishes physical silence (*silentium*) from mental calm and concord (*tranquillitas*), but leaves both conceptions within the language of “quiet” (*quies*). He does not deny that *silentium* is a sort of *quies*, only that it doesn’t actually match the sort of *placida quies*, viz. *tranquillitas*, we expect it to be or produce. Seneca doesn’t need to supply the concept of mental peace nor convince us it is good, but we erroneously conceive of it as an effect of physical silence and a relaxed body, rather than, as Seneca says, of a

⁸⁸ Cf. Stewart (1997) 13.

⁸⁹ See also the ancient conception of thought as internal dialogue expressed most explicitly in Plato, *Theaet.* 190a carried on by the Stoics (see Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 8.275-276 [=LS 53T] with Long (1971) 82-83).

“good mind.” As a case in point, Seneca depicts a rather egregious yet recognizable fool, who fruitlessly expects night’s silence and a prone body to bring him peace of mind. Recognizing his error, we should then reconceive the quality of “peaceful” (*placidus*) as that of an internal and cognitive state, effected by reason, rather than silence or bodily rest.⁹⁰ While Seneca doesn’t seem to rule out the legitimate use of *placidus* to refer to quiet *qua* physical silence, he does make it essentially depend on a concomitant mental quietude (*nulla placida est quies nisi quam ratio composuit*).⁹¹

Thus the final paradox, “sometimes quiet is unquiet,” synthesizes these lines of thought and forces us to cement these conceptual distinctions that were previously blurred.⁹² Mader’s distinction between “material” and “spiritual” perspectives is useful here, for resolution requires us to recognize that the term *quies* must be viewed through the “material” perspective, in which “quiet” denotes the conception of physical silence, and the term *inquieta* must be viewed through the “spiritual” perspective that sees “quiet” as mental stillness. Fools, in their mental turmoil, may often be in a state of quiet – at rest and in silence – even as they are greatly disquieted. But this semantic paradox does not bring about a displacement or “shift” from the “material” to the “spiritual” perspective, as Mader argues.⁹³ Rather, resolution clarifies and distinguishes the conceptions of *quies* as *silentium* and *quies* as *tranquillitas*, each of which fit within distinct but coherent perspectives and manners of speaking or

⁹⁰ This internalization of a previously external quality is common in Senecan and Stoic thought. See, e.g., on freedom in Diogenes Laertius 7.121-2 (=LS 67M) and *Ep.* 80 (cf. Edwards (2009)). And this is reflected also in Seneca’s language, as most famously explored by Traina (1974).

⁹¹ Cf. *Ep.* 66, where Seneca makes the same conceptual distinction between *bonum* and *malum*, such that we may justifiably call pleasure or pain good or bad, but only insofar as we recognize that this depends on the quality of one’s engagement with them, not the matters themselves.

⁹² A similar use of semantic paradox occurs also at, e.g., *Ep.* 7.3, *Ep.* 22.11, *Ep.* 32.11, *Ep.* 37.4, *Ep.* 48.2-3, *Ep.* 98.1, *Ep.* 124.24, *Prov.* 6.5, *V.B.* 4.2, and *Tranq.* 12.3.

⁹³ Mader (1982) 73.

thinking.⁹⁴ While *silentium* may no longer be seen as itself a good, we do not only now come to see tranquility as a good or shift our evaluative beliefs, for, as I understand Seneca, we already conceived of it as so. Again, we just clarified what precisely it is we conceive of such *tranquillitas* as. And this clarification proves vital for our philosophical practice, for Seneca goes on in *Ep.* 56 to warn against mistaking the deceptive quiet of inaction (*inertia*) and leisure (*otium*) as ethical progress, precisely because it can seem like *tranquillitas* yet lacks the foundation of reason and virtue (8.4-15).

Seneca's use of semantic paradox uniquely leverages the polysemic nature of our linguistic *consuetudo* as a tool for resolving conceptual inconsistencies and confusions concealed by it in such a way that both highlights the resulting paradoxicality while reinforcing its superficial character. Of course our substantial lack of earlier, Greek Stoic sources limits the ability to declare Senecan semantic paradox truly unique, but two details may point that way. First, we know that despite their penchant for neologism, Greek Stoics left even various key concepts terminologically undistinguished. We know, for instance, that the Stoics took pains to clarify the different conceptions that certain single terms may denote, such as "value" (ἄξια), "soul" (ψύχη), and "slavery" (δουλεία).⁹⁵ Yet nonetheless we find no evidence of earlier Stoic use of such ambiguity through semantic paradox, all the more surprising given that, should such semantic paradoxes have existed, we would expect Plutarch to feature them prominently in his *On Stoic Self-Contradictions*.⁹⁶ Second, we do see such Stoic semantic paradoxes, but only in non-Stoic works meant to lampoon rather than promote Stoic claims. So,

⁹⁴ Cf. Stewart (1997) 13.

⁹⁵ On "value," Stobaeus 2.83.10-84.2 (=LS 58D); on "soul," Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.234; and on "slavery," Diogenes Laertius 7.121-2 (=LS 67M) and Athenaeus 267b (=LS 67Q). On such ambiguity and disambiguation, see Atherton (1993).

⁹⁶ However, we may equally not be surprised, given that the Stoics held linguistic clarity as a consummate stylistic virtue (Diogenes Laertius 7.59). On this see Atherton (1993) 87-92 and (1988) and Moretti (1995).

for instance, in Cicero's famous satirization of Cato's Stoicism, he writes in the *Pro Murena*: "Only sages are beautiful, even if grotesquely misshapen, wealthy, even if most poor, kings, even if slaving in servitude" (*solos sapientes esse, si distortissimi sint, formosos, si mendicissimi, divites, si servitudinem serviant, reges*; 61.13-14).⁹⁷ Or, in a more oblique semantic paradox, Horace writes in *Epistle* 1.1: "In sum, the sage is no less than Jupiter alone, wealthy, free, honored, attractive, and, indeed, a king of kings. Above all, he is sound, except when he is troubled by a cold" (*Ad summam, sapiens uno minor est Iove, dives, / liber, honoratus, pulcher, rex denique regum; / praecipue sanus, nisi cum pituita molesta est*; 106-108).⁹⁸ If it is true that Seneca innovates within the Stoic tradition in his use of semantic paradox and, equally, does so in a Latin tradition where such paradox typically highlights absurdity, it is unsurprising that the vast majority of Senecan semantic paradoxes appear as the sort of synoptic *sententiae* we saw exemplified above. Appearing after material that offers a means for resolution, such semantic paradoxes avoid striking the reader as patently absurd and instead promote conceptual disambiguation.

If such paradoxes risk appearing unserious and are not essential for conceptual clarification, why might Seneca use them at all, let alone as often as he does? If we consider contemporary uses of semantic paradox, I suggest that we see in Senecan paradox a reversal of a common theme beneath semantic paradoxes, that of the possibility of an irreconcilable element in nature and, especially, morality. According to Garth Tissol, Ovid's use of semantic paradox (although he does not call it this) in the *Metamorphoses* reflects in linguistic form the ethical impasse one reaches in a situation that has no right answer and forbids true resolu-

⁹⁷ On this scene, see Craig (1986). It is telling, I think, that in Cicero's *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, where Cicero argues in support of Stoicism, he does not engage in semantic paradox, despite ample opportunity.

⁹⁸ Cf. *Sat.* 1.3.124ff. On Stoic paradoxes in Latin satire, see Moretti (1995) 172-188, Sigsbee (1968), and Sigsbee (1976).

tion.⁹⁹ Thus, when Alethea in Book Eight resolves to murder her son to avenge her brothers, Ovid writes, “and in order that she might appease fraternal shades with blood, she is pious in her impiety” (*et consanguineas ut sanguine leniat umbras, / impietate pia est*; 476-477). As Tissol writes, “as in all Ovidian paradoxes, this one assaults the normally well-protected mental categories of the reader,” although this assault is particularly jarring, for

little can have seemed more important [to the Roman readers] than the distinction between *pius* and *impius*, along with the understanding of how these terms are to be applied to human conduct. Such understanding, of course, depends on the opposition of these terms and the recognition of boundaries that separate them and keep them at a safe distance from each other. These are the very boundaries that are obliterated in Alethea’s situation and its representation in paradoxical language.¹⁰⁰

Like Senecan semantic paradox, the semantic paradox of *impietate pia* destabilizes our conceptual apparatus and understanding, threatening conflation in its effected confusion. But for Ovid, this represents the inescapable ethical paradox of the situation, encapsulating its irresolvability and the inadequacy of our concepts of piety and impiety. Senecan paradox, on the other hand, uses this confusion and perceived inadequacy as a catalyst for resolution and conceptual revision. For Ovid, semantic paradox reflects the paradoxicality of the (ethical) world, for Seneca, of the fool’s worldview.¹⁰¹

Even closer to home for Seneca, Joy Connolly has suggested that the paradoxical, epigrammatic *sententiae* in the stylized deliberations of Seneca the Elder’s *Controversiae* “crystallize awareness of the extent to which we presuppose certain ‘obvious’ beliefs and ‘natural’ values and of the conflicts that boil up as a result.”¹⁰² So, for instance, Seneca presents prosecutions and defenses given for a hypothetical case where a son has been disinherited by his

⁹⁹ Tissol (1997) 14-15; cf. 52-61.

¹⁰⁰ Tissol (1997) 15 and 14 respectively.

¹⁰¹ On the world’s essential paradoxicality in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, see Beagon (2009), Tarrant (2002), and Hardie (2002) 44-45.

¹⁰² Connolly (2009) 333.

father for refusing to deny aid to an impoverished uncle, only to then be adopted by that uncle, who then proceeds to disinherit his adopted nephew for giving aid to his (now) impoverished father.¹⁰³ In response to a defense that hedges its bets, implying that the son acted rightly out of filial duty and yet, recognizing that he was acting against his uncles wishes, only gave enough aid to stave off his father's starvation, the orator Latro declared, "the disinherited boy should not subtract anything from the glory of his own misdeed" (*non est abdicato quicquam ex gloria criminis sui detrahendum*; 1.1.20.5-6). Latro pinpoints by his paradoxical rebuttal the contradictoriness of such a defense that amounts to casting both the aid and obedience to the uncle as ethically praiseworthy and condemnable. Equally, this *sententia* captures the underlying and seemingly irresolvable tension that runs throughout this hypothetical, Antigonean dilemma between obeying authority and fulfilling "natural" duties. Seneca the Elder's *Controversiae* do not expressly deny the reconciliation of these ethical dilemmas, but, as Connolly shows, in opposition to other comparable studies in ethical deliberation, which provide the means of resolution, the *Controversiae*, particularly in its paradoxical *sententiae*, concerns itself more with the dilemma and does nothing to suggest it is not unavoidable.¹⁰⁴ An essential and unique thrust, then, of Seneca the Younger's semantic paradox, in direct contrast to other authors' uses, is that paradoxicality results not from some inherent contradiction in ethical or natural matters, but in and as a result of our own faulty, inconsistent worldviews. And this situation comes to the forefront in the final category of Senecan paradox: "thaumastic" paradox.

¹⁰³ C. 1.1.

¹⁰⁴ Connolly (2009) 349.

(C) “Thaumastic” paradox

A thaumastic paradox is a paradoxical physical entity or state of affairs. This may range from the uphill-flowing river or the never-before-seen comet discussed in Chapter One to any matter or occurrence – say, a new computer crashing – that subverts one’s understanding or expectations about the world.¹⁰⁵ Thaumastic paradoxes obviously figure differently in Senecan texts from conceptual or semantic paradoxes, since thaumastic paradoxes are concrete, not linguistic. Their paradoxicality *within the text* often turns on how Seneca describes them, viz. in a paradoxical way, and, thus, Seneca reflects their, as it were, reified paradoxicality through conceptual or semantic paradox in their descriptions.¹⁰⁶ Or, at other times, he’ll explicitly specify how we find such-and-such a thing paradoxical.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless, as thaumastic paradoxes, they play an important part in this study. First, Seneca’s engagement with such paradoxes in the life of the fool focuses on an essential element we have seen underlying the prior two categories of paradox: the cosmos and any of its states of affairs lack paradoxicality and, thus, the perceived paradoxicality of any matter within or concerning the cosmos reflects the nature of our ignorance alone. And second, it is within the context of thaumastic paradoxes in Seneca that two further essential features of paradox of any sort become most clear, viz. its affective component – that unpleasant feeling of surprise or disbelief – which most directly account for the power of paradox *qua* paradox to deny us fools the tranquility that attends wisdom and virtue, and the role of precipitancy in the paradoxicality of the fool’s experience.

The Stoic cosmos unfolds in accordance with a perfectly rational, divine arrangement embodied in and enacted by god itself, which actively and continually informs every feature

¹⁰⁵ See Section III.

¹⁰⁶ E.g., *Tranq.* 12.3, *Ben.* 14.5, *Ep.* 37.4-5, and *Ep.* 120.19-22.

¹⁰⁷ E.g., at *Prov.* 3.2, *V.B.* 15.6, *Ben.* 4.39.4, *Ep.* 9.19, and *Ep.* 71.23.

of the cosmos and exists as a part of it, in a similar relationship to the universe as our soul to our body.¹⁰⁸ In this way, the ordering of the cosmos reflects (indeed, *is*) divine reason, which, like the sage's reason, is perfectly consistent.¹⁰⁹ Seneca emphasizes this rational and continuous providential arrangement of the world in the opening of his *On Providence*.¹¹⁰

It is unnecessary to show at present that so great a work [the cosmos] does not exist without some caretaker [*aliquo custode*], and that this arrangement [*coetum*] and orbiting of stars does not happen by a chance force [*fortuiti impetus*] or that while whatever a chance occurrence moves often is disordered and quickly fails, this unhindered speed moves by the power of an eternal law [*aeternae legis imperio*] as it bears so much by land and sea and so many bright stars that shine out as ordered [*ex disposito*]. It is unnecessary to show that this arrangement [*ordinem*] is not one of random matter or that whatever blindly comes together does not hang together with such finesse that the most ponderous weight of the earth sits unmoving and watches the flight of the heavens as it passes around it, or that seas that have flowed into valleys temper the lands and yet know no increase by the rivers [which flow into them], or that vast beings grow from the tiniest seeds. And those things that seem conflicting and uncertain [*confusa et incerta*] – I am speaking of storms and clouds and the bolt of lightning strikes and the fires poured out from cratered mountain peaks and the trembling of unstable land and whatever else the turbulent element of things around earth stirs up – do not occur without reason [*sine ratione*], although they are sudden [*subita*], but even these have their own explanations [*causas*] no less than whatever is viewed as miraculous [*miraculo*] due to its unusual situation [*alienis locis*], such as fires in the middle of watery waves and new islands that spring up in the vast expanse of the sea. (1.2-3)

Seneca contrasts a world that operates via random chance, which he rejects, with our world, as he sees it, that an eternal, rational ([sc. *non*] *sine ratione*), and directing law orders and drives.¹¹¹ And when we fail to recognize this cosmic cohesion rendered by such a law, we confuse mere suddenness (*subita*) and unusualness (*alienis*), features quite compatible with an ordered cosmos, with unintelligible (*incerta*), erratic (*confusa*), and paradoxical (*miraculo*) incon-

¹⁰⁸ See, e.g., Seneca, *N.Q.* 1.13-14, *N.Q.* 2.45.1, *Ep.* 65.24, *Ben.* 4.7.1, Aetius 1.7.33 (=LS 46A), Plutarch *St. Rep.* 1052c-d (=LS 46E), Aristocles in Eusebius *Pr. Ev.* 15.14.2 (=LS 46G) with Setaioli (2007) and (2015), Reydams-Schils (2010), and White (2003).

¹⁰⁹ See, e.g., Seneca, *N.Q.* 1.14, *Ep.* 65, and *Ep.* 92.30 with Gauly (2015) 372-373, Setaioli (2015) 381-383, and Brennan (2003) 287 n. 63.

¹¹⁰ For a similar cosmic picture, see, e.g., *N.Q.* 1.13-15.

¹¹¹ On this eternal, “natural” law in Seneca, see Inwood (2003) and Gauly (2015) 372-373; in earlier Stoicism, see Vogt (2008).

sistency.¹¹² Our inability to fit such phenomena within our understanding of the universe demonstrates our own ignorance rather than some inexplicable feature of nature.

This principle of rational cosmic cohesion unifies Seneca's understanding and investigation of the natural world, as Gareth Williams has demonstrated about the *Natural Questions*.¹¹³ To understand the world, we must see it as a coherent whole and seek answers from a perspective determined not by our own foolish, blinkered, and parochial concerns but from one that sees everything as a part related to the whole.¹¹⁴ In one way, this ideal "cosmic viewpoint," as Williams puts it, consists precisely in one's commitment to nature's rational unification and coherency, a commitment in accordance with which we not only resist seeing the unexplained or strange as (thus) paradoxical, but also reject views that contradict both rational cosmic cohesion and any other coordinated commitment. We have already seen in Section III of Chapter One this viewpoint in action in the preface of Book Seven of the *Natural Questions* concerning comets, where Seneca aims to dissuade us from thinking them paradoxical and, as it were, outside the strictures of the heavens. These unexpected comets, now paired with other unusual natural events, reappear in a similar light in Seneca's discussion of earthquakes in Book Six of the *Natural Questions*, only here Seneca draws attention specifically to the problematic ethical and psychological effects that attend such erroneously supposed paradoxes.¹¹⁵ Seneca writes:

However, because we are ignorant [*ignorantibus*] of the truth, everything is more terrifying, particularly as the rarity of these increases the fear. Familiar things strike more gently, and fear is greater at what is unexpected [*ex insolito*]. Why, then, is anything unexpected for us? Because we grasp nature through our eyes and not through reason, and we do not consider what she is able to do, but only what she has done. We

¹¹² On cosmic cohesion as such, see *N.Q.* 2.2-5.

¹¹³ Williams (2012) esp. 17-47, 60-66, 251-254, and 303-313.

¹¹⁴ Williams (2012) esp. 21-48, 251-254, 289-294, and 303-313 with P. Hadot (1995) 238-250.

¹¹⁵ On Chapter Six of the *N.Q.*, see Williams (2012) 213-257 and Inwood (2005b) 178-185.

are thus punished for our carelessness [*neglegentiae*] when frightened by something as if it were novel [*tamquam novis*], though it is not novel, just unexpected. What do I mean? Doesn't it strike religious awe [*religionem*] in our minds, and indeed in the whole populace, if the sun has been seen to eclipse, or the moon, whose darkening is more frequent, is concealed partly or wholly? And how much more for these: fires drawn across the open air and a great part of the sky burning and comets and multiple sun-like orbs and stars seen during the day and sudden flashes of fires that drag a great light behind them? We marvel [*miramur*] at none of these without fear. And since ignorance [*nescire*] is the reason for being afraid, is it not of great important to know, in order that we not be frightened? (3.2.1-4.2)

This passage links the opening of *N.Q.* 6 with the following discussion on the nature of earthquakes. *N.Q.* 6 opens with a standard Senecan consolation, in this case, aimed in general at those who fear death from unusual (*rara*; 6.2.1.1) natural disasters such as earthquakes.¹¹⁶ We fear earthquakes in particular, Seneca argues, because they seem inescapable in their magnitude (*latissime patet inevitabile, audum, publice noxium*; 6.1.7.3-4). Against this fear Seneca marshals a two-prong argument that both, paradoxically, present such frightening danger as even more inescapable than most recognize. On the one hand, concerning earthquakes in particular, Seneca links such seismic events to the changeability of the cosmos as a whole ([*natura*] *nihil immune esse et innoxium sinit*; 6.1.13.6-7, cf. 6.2.1.2-4) and points out that no stretch of land appears immune to earthquakes. As such, it is foolish to think oneself safe simply because your home has not yet been shaken. On the other hand, Seneca wryly admits at 6.2.1 that this seems hardly comforting, but nonetheless defends the calming power of this perspective, which sees deadly danger everywhere, and encapsulates the paradoxicality of such a “comfort” with the admonition “if you wish to fear nothing, grasp that everything must be feared” (*si uultis nihil timere, cogitate omnia esse metuenda*; 6.2.3.1). Our fear of earthquakes lies at its core in their ability to harm or kill us, but as the following discussion at 6.2.3-8 demonstrates, everyday matters – a small cut, water, etc. – can do harm no less than

¹¹⁶ On the similarities between Seneca's consolatory methodology here and in his other consolations, see Williams (2012) 215-219 and Limburg (2007) 299-342.

earthquakes and other unusually grand forms of demise (cf. “those things [earthquakes, etc.] ought not to disturb us as if they themselves hold greater evil than a more commonplace death,” *adeo non debent nos ista confundere, tamquam plus in se mali habeant quam vulgaris mors*; 6.2.7.1-2).

Seneca’s consolation rests primarily on a sort of resignation to the ubiquity of death rather than an attack on the underlying conception of death as bad, which drives our fear.¹¹⁷ Indeed, Seneca seems to recognize the limitations of such a consolation (6.2.1.6-7), for he specifically addresses our belief in death’s evil at the end of *N.Q.* 6. The scope of Seneca’s initial consolation is more specific. It aims only to assuage (1) the heightening of fear we feel in thinking the means of death makes death itself worse and (2) the additional psychological distress that comes when something strikes as unexpected, as Seneca describes in *N.Q.* 6.3.2-4. In arguing for the ubiquity of death, Seneca stops us fools from considering it only “with our eyes” rather than “with reason” (6.3.2.5-7), for we routinely consider only on the memorable accounts of death by earthquake, lightning strike, and plague, oblivious of the deadly potential in all of nature.¹¹⁸ In accepting the natural omnipresence of death due to the fragility of our mortality (6.2.3.4-6), we come to expect that anything may harm us. No longer, then, will an earthquake *as something harmful* strike us with greater fear in its unexpectedness or grandiosity. Moreover, the first prong of Seneca’s consolation brings this thinking to bear on earthquakes *qua* earthquakes. Even they are not to be unexpected, for nowhere is truly immune from them. Seneca’s consolation turns in part on refitting death and natural disaster into the reader’s foolish worldview such that their imminence no longer catches us off guard, which is to say, they cease to be paradoxical.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Inwood (2005b) 179-180 and Williams (2012) 219: “From one perspective, Seneca may appear to urge solace through our passive submission to nature’s way...”

¹¹⁸ Cf. e.g. *Ep.* 14.3-6 and *Ep.* 57.6.

While *N.Q.* 6.3.2-4 clarifies the parameters of the opening as a move against the additional distress of an unexpected misfortune, it addresses most explicitly a different sort of mental turmoil that paradox also inspires. The initial consolation treats a particular sort of painful surprise that follows the reversal of hope (cf. *promittentibus*; 6.1.15.2 and *sperare*; 6.2.2.5): we hope to avoid earthquakes by living where we expect there will be none, and we hope to avoid death by avoiding only its misleadingly threatening means. Both misguided hopes increase our fear and grief when reality proves contradictory. But *N.Q.* 6.3.2-4 concerns most directly the fear of the inexplicable and what does not fit within our worldview, in a way similar to the opening of *N.Q.* 7 concerning comets. Seneca prefaces *N.Q.* 6.3.2-4 with an Epicurean warning against taking such unusual and destructive events as signs of divine anger, for they happen not by divine decree but for their own reasons (§3.1).¹¹⁹ And it is this ignorance of causes and explanations, together with an event's rarity, that increases our fear. Yet just like the ignorance at work in those Seneca first consoles, our distress grows greater because our worldview expects nature to act only as we have seen her act before, not as we would know she can act should we consider her in her own right (6.3.2.5-7; cf. 1.praef.17). Our faulty worldview, then, makes something we rarely see or have never seen before (*insolita*) into something paradoxical (*nova*; 6.3.2.9) and supernatural (*religionem incutit mentibus*; 6.3.3.1), a response, Seneca claims, that fear naturally accompanies (6.3.4.1).

Seneca's rationalizing investigation into earthquakes, which takes up the majority of the chapter (6.4-31), provides justification for his consolatory view that earthquakes occur for natural reasons and resolves their paradoxicality and that of its effects (*mille miracula*; 6.4.1.12). For this study at least, there are two crucial elements of this resolution. First, Seneca's explanation of earthquakes follows from that totalizing perspective that views the world

¹¹⁹ On such Epicurean and Lucretian overtones and themes in *N.Q.* 6, see Williams (2012) 213-257.

as a coherent whole. In particular, the very substance, air (*spiritus*, =πνεῦμα), which pervades and sustains the cosmos as a vital whole (cf. *N.Q.* 2.2-11 and *Helv.* 8.3), causes the earth to shake when it forcefully escapes subterranean recesses and accounts for the nature and effects of earthquakes (6.16-18 and 21-31).¹²⁰ Earthquakes thus become a necessary concomitant of the essential, omnipresent, life-giving cosmic force, a fact, Seneca argues, that becomes obvious when we consider the nature of air, since

necessarily whatever is full of the most mobile substance is often moved. For who can doubt that anything is as restless [*inquietum*], changeable [*versabile*], and pleased by tumult [*agitatione gaudens*] as air? (6.16.4.4-8)

Second, the essential link between earthquakes and air, whose nature we understand better, allows Seneca to resolve the many seemingly paradoxical features of earthquakes through extending, via analogy and extrapolation, known behaviors of air to its unrecognized role in seismic activity (6.17.1-2, 18.6-7, 24.2-4, and 30.4-5). These thaumastic paradoxes, then, reveal themselves as both substantive and superficial, to be resolved precisely in the manner we previously saw Lucretius address the paradoxicality of imperceptible, atomic movement.¹²¹ In fact, as Williams clearly shows, this similarity in approach is no mere coincidence but rather a conscious move on Seneca's part.¹²² No longer are earthquakes some extraordinary (*nova*) act of god, despite their magnitude and intensity, for they are merely the well-known result of a fluid (whether water or air) under pressure in a stoppered container (6.17.1-2 and 18.6-7) on a macro scale. Earthquakes may be relatively rare, but they are as integrated into cosmic nature as their source, air. As such, when we get it right, our conception of earthquakes mirrors this cosmic consistency in its integration within our worldviews.

¹²⁰ On *pneuma* in Stoic theory, see esp. Plutarch, *Com. Not.* 1085c-d (=LS 47G); Galen, *Plac.* 5.3.8 (=LS 47H); Nemesius 70.6-71.4 (=LS 47J); Diogenes Laertius 7.138-139 (=LS 47O); and Philo, *Quod Deus Sit Immutabilis* 35-36 (=LS 47Q) with White (2003).

¹²¹ Section III in Chapter One.

¹²² Williams (2012) 215-225 and 241-257.

So, like conceptual and semantic paradoxes, rational investigation of thaumastic paradoxes leads to resolution not just through filling out, so to speak, our conceptions of the matter at hand with accurate details, but, more precisely, through seeing how such details fit or fail to fit together and follow from other commitments already within our worldview. Indeed Seneca rules out other elemental causes of earthquakes and other, different accounts of air's role precisely because the theories contradict the behavior of these elements on a smaller scale.¹²³ Equally, like conceptual and semantic paradoxes, behind our ignorance of the natural causes of the matter at hand lies a conflation of what is sudden and uncommon with what exceeds the bounds of our worldview. We lack the more general view that the cosmos is a unified whole, not just as a physical unity (2.4.2-3) but also as a unified causal nexus (2.11.1-2 and 1.praef.14-15, cf. *immutabilis causarum inter se cohaerentium series*; *Helv.* 8.3.5-6). Without this, we take some unusual event we cannot yet explain as inexplicable, paradoxical, and supernaturally frightening. As Seneca explores various natural *mirabilia* in the *N.Q.*, each explanation, which integrates each seemingly paradoxical phenomenon into a coherent universe, equally integrates this broader, stabilizing view of cosmic unity. The resulting cosmic perspective then rightly expects at first sight even the unknown and surprising, once investigated, to fall into its proper place.

But outside of the *N.Q.*, the thaumastic paradoxes of greatest concern are of a much smaller and more personal scale, but nonetheless their paradoxicality, its causes, and Seneca's resolutions are similar. In a sister piece to Book 6 of the *N.Q.*, *Ep.* 91, Seneca tells Lucilius, spurred by the news of the devastating fire of Lyons, that "novelty adds weight to our misfortunes, every mortal is distressed all the more by what is also paradoxical" (*novitas adicit*

¹²³ So cf. *N.Q.* 6.6.3, 14.2, 14.4, and 24.2.

calamitatibus pondus, nec quisquam mortalium non magis quod etiam miratus est doluit; 3.3-5, cf. *inexpectata* at 3.3):

Thus nothing ought to be unforeseen [*improvisum*] by us. The mind must be cast forth [*praemittendus*] into all matters and what is not only likely to happen but also simply possible must be grasped. For what is there that Fortune does not, whenever she has wished it, take away from the most prosperous [*ex forentissimo*]... No time is exempt. The causes of our distress arise in our very pleasures. War arises amidst peace and succor for safety changes into an object of fear: an enemy changes into a friend and an ally from an enemy... Sickness strikes the most moderate, fever the most healthy, punishment the most innocent, and unrest the most secluded [*secretissimos tumultus*]. (4.1-4, 5.3-6 and 9-11)

Seneca's warning here presents the same *praemeditatio malorum futurorum* encapsulated in the opening consolation of *N.Q.* 6, although where there the focus is only on grasping the hidden imminence of death, here the practice ranges most widely to all possible reversals of fortune.¹²⁴ And our failure again is that noted in *N.Q.* 6.3.2.5-7: we think only of what we have seen happen before and think likely, when we ought to escape our narrow, egocentric perspective to recognize all that is possible (*cogitandumque non quidquid solet sed quidquid potest fieri*). From this vantage point, we grasp that we should expect such reversals, for "we have come to be in such a world in which we live under such laws" (*in eum intravimus mundum in quo his legibus vivitur*; *Ep.* 91.15.5-6). The world is always in the process of change, often from one opposite to another, in accordance with the natural laws of the cosmic order, and once we fully integrate this natural law of change into our worldview, change itself, however radical and even if we do not recognize its particular causes, loses its paradoxicality. The suddenness of such change may still surprise us – even the sage reflexively startles (*inhorrescet ad subita*; *Ep.* 57.4.4) – but we'll recognize such reversals of fortune as what it is to be human and a part of this ever-unfolding universe. This practice most directly eases the additional blow that unexpectedness adds to misfortune, but Seneca sees it also as a means for us to see such

¹²⁴ On the practice of *praemeditatio malorum futurorum*, see Armisen-Marchetti (2008) and Manning (1976).

misfortune as less evil. To see the inevitability of change and misfortune at a historical or even cosmic level, the severity of our own reversals are relativized, lessened, and contextualized in a way rarely reflected in our self-centered evaluations (*quiquid inciderit sciamus non esse tam magnum quam rumore iactetur*; 9.7-8). Nonetheless, like the consolation of *N.Q.* 6, *praemeditatio malorum futurorum* doesn't directly address the root of our distress, the erroneous view that these unexpected reversals are in fact bad.

It might be surprising, then, to see the sage's tranquility in the face of the unexpected put in terms of this *praemeditatio*, for what purpose does this serve someone who is not at risk of distress at such unexpected evil precisely because she does not see it as so? Still, in distinguishing us fools from the sage (cf. 11.1-2) in *On the Tranquility of the Mind*, Seneca writes:

He who fears death will never do anything befitting a living man [*pro homine vivo*]. But he who knows that this was fated [*condictum*] to him at the moment he was conceived will live in accordance with this rule [*formulam*], and at once he will also show through a certain strength of mind that nothing that happens to him is unexpected [*ne quid ex quae eveniunt subitum sit*]. For by foreseeing whatever is able to happen as if it will happen the blow of every evil [*malorum omnium*] softens [*molliet*], evils which bring nothing novel [*nihil novi*] to those prepared for and expecting them yet arrive as burdens to those untroubled [*securis*] and hoping only for good fortune [*beata tantum sperantibus*]. There is sickness, bondage, and the ruin of fire: none of these are unexpected [*repentinum*]. I knew in what turbulent company [*tumultuosum contubernium*] nature had confined me. (11.6.1-7.3)

I take it that Seneca's talk of evil (*malorum omnium*) reflects the foolish worldview and the colloquial meaning, which, strictly speaking, identifies dispreferred indifferents, and not how the sage interprets them.¹²⁵ Thus this discussion of distress alleviation (*molliet*) as opposed to elimination, as would be the result for the sage, unsurprisingly speaks primarily to the *praemeditatio*'s effect for Seneca's foolish readers, even as it is put into the context of the sage's life. Moreover, the passage focuses on the sage's perception of nothing as unexpected (*subi-*

¹²⁵ For a discussion of Seneca's fluctuation between the Stoic and colloquial usages of *malum* and *bonum*, see Roller (2001) 72-77.

tum, *nihil novi*, and *repentinum*) due to the sage’s knowledge that he is part of a changeable world (*tumultuosum contubernium*), rather than that what most think bad is not. And despite the fact that the sage would not find any such “misfortunes” distressing, this passage is not redundant or nonsensical, since finding something paradoxical, regardless of its evaluative valence, affects a human’s affective state negatively.

The Stoic soul is unified and rational – i.e. there is no feeling part distinct from the thinking one – and every activity of the mind functions via thoughts.¹²⁶ As such, thinking and feeling constitute a single activity, with the result that thinking in a certain way *feels* a certain way: all cognitive activity has, as it were, affective coloring.¹²⁷ Thus, in addition to the negative or positive affect that attends our emotions proper (*παθή*), such affect accompanies other non-emotive forms of thinking too. For Seneca, foremost among such affect is the discontent and anxiety that flavors conflicting and vacillating thought and the cognitive turmoil this constitutes, often contrasted with the tranquility that colors the stable and smooth flowing mind of the sage.¹²⁸ For now, we should recognize the fundamental role paradox plays in this discontent. As we have seen, the paradoxicality of our thoughts (relative to some facet of our worldview) underlies their conflict and instability. Our foolish minds are never truly at ease precisely because our thoughts aren’t, for anything we accept as so on account of some of our commitments necessarily creates a discomforting dissonance with our other commitments.¹²⁹ So when what we take as misfortune befalls us that we did not expect, thinking that our present condition would continue, the emotional distress we feel at

¹²⁶ Diogenes Laertius 7.49-51 (=LS 39A) and Stobaeus, 2.86.17-87.6 (=LS 53Q).

¹²⁷ I borrow the term “affective coloring” from Katja Vogt. On this, see McVane (forthcoming) and Vogt (2014a) 113 and 116-117 with Frede (1986) on the indivisibility of Stoic thinking and feeling.

¹²⁸ On this, see Chapter Three.

¹²⁹ In fact, to see that the Stoics were onto something in joining affect and thinking, one need only consider the well-known phenomenon of cognitive dissonance (see, esp., Festinger (1957) with Cooper (2007a) and Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999)).

this perceived evil is compounded, as Seneca has been saying, by the additional affective blow of its contradiction to our expectation of continued good fortune.¹³⁰ Since distress at supposed evil and discontent felt in cognitive conflict *per se* are distinct, even without erroneous evaluative commitments, the sage could still experience the latter, should she, *per impossible*, fail to grasp and always consider the natural law of change. But, of course, as Seneca tells us in *Tranq.* 11.6.1-7.3, she does, and the enactment of this knowledge resembles the practice of *meditatio malorum futurum*, the fruits of which are more perfectly embodied in her than in any fool.

Due to the sage's knowledge and the stability it provides, *praemeditatio malorum futurum* is more a perspective or habit for the sage than a practice, as it is for the fool. This follows from what this *praemeditatio* is: in the usual context of us fools, it is the practice of recalling to mind the fickleness of fortune in its various instantiations with the aim of cementing this fact in our minds. We fools need to do this and do it repeatedly because in our precipitate and changing ignorance we are inclined to either forget it or, more likely, fail to consider it in our day-to-day thinking. Practice this *praemeditatio* enough, one hopes, and we'll no longer need to practice it because our every thought reflects it, which is to say we view and do everything through a perspective framed by the *praemeditatio*'s underlying commitment and subsequently nothing will strike us as paradoxical. And this is precisely the state of the sage, whose whole worldview is consistent with the natural law of change and whose non-precipitancy keeps every thought in line with it. Thus Seneca tells us a few chapters later in *On the Tranquility of the Mind* after he warns us against unnecessary business:

¹³⁰ Such a feeling need have no direct connection with the conscious recognition of a view's paradoxicality. Rather, I think, it consists in the "rough" or "jarring" way the (physical) impression would move in our mind on account of its clashing with the commitments it contradicts. On this relationship between the physical, phenomenological, and conceptual facets of an impression, see Sextus Empiricus' discussion of "smooth" and thus persuasive impressions (*M.* 7.242-246 [=LS 39G] with Vogt (2014a) 113).

For whoever does many things often gives Fortune power over him, and it is safest to test her only rarely, and otherwise always keep her in mind and promise nothing to yourself that rests on her trustworthiness [*de fide eius*]: “I will sail, unless something happens” and “I will become a praetor, unless something gets in the way” and “My business will be profitable for me, unless something interferes.” For this reason, then, we say that nothing paradoxical [*nihil contra opinionem*] occurs for the sage: we do not remove that man from the chance events of a mortal life but from its mistakes [*erroribus*], and everything does not occur for that man as he intended [*ut voluit*] it to, but as he knew it would [*ut cogitavit*], for he also knew at the onset that something could stand in the way of his aims [*propositis*]. Moreover, it is necessary that the distress [*dolorem*] of a disappointed desire [*destitutae cupiditatis*] comes to the mind more lightly to which, at any rate, you do not promise success. (13.2-3)

As in *Tranq.* 11.6.5-9 above (*quiquid...veniunt*), we should be careful to distinguish between Seneca’s description of the sage’s condition and what that means for us fools. Here, Seneca’s final point about the alleviation of the distress over unrequited desires must be directed at us fools as it identifies why we should try to emulate the sage in her response to the future’s uncertainty.¹³¹ While without this “reservation” (ὑπεξαίρεσις or *exceptio*), the sage’s impulses in their aim at some state of affairs not entirely within her control – e.g. getting healthy, getting food, etc. – are at risk of being foiled, her desire, strictly speaking, is only ever to maintain and enact her virtue, and this cannot be foiled, for she cannot fail to fulfill this desire.¹³²

Seneca provides additional details about the sage’s reservation in *On Favors*:

The sage does not change his decisions so long as all things remain as they were when he decided on it [*sumeret*]. Therefore that man never feels regret [*paenitentia*], since nothing better was able to happen at that time than what was done, and nothing better could have been decided than what was decided. Still, the sage comes to everything with reservation [*cum exceptione*]: “If nothing occurs that would get in the way.” Thus we say that all things are a success for that man and nothing paradoxical [*nihil contra opinionem*] occurs, since he has considered in his mind that something might interfere that might prevent what is intended [*destinata*]. Fools are confident that Fortune has made promises to them. The sage considers both his aspects: he knows how much room there is for error, how uncertain mortal affairs are [*quam incerta sint humana*], and how much may obstruct his plans [*consiliis*]. The sage proceeds mindful of [*suspensus*] the uncertainty of [future] affairs and the slipperiness of chance

¹³¹ *Contra* Brennan (2000) 165.

¹³² See, e.g., *Ep.* 59.14 and Cicero, *Fin.* 3.17.20-22. On this “reservation” in Stoic theory, see Inwood (1985) 119-124 and Brennan (2000).

[*lubricam sortem*], and he judges uncertain events with certain decisions [*consiliis certis incertos eventus expendit*]. The reservation, at least, without which he aims at and undertakes nothing, protects that man also. (4.34.4-5)

The sage's reservation prevents her from making non-kataleptic commitments concerning the future at the same time as it allows her, nonetheless, to make the future-oriented commitments necessary for human action, and this habit forms one facet of the sage's general cognitive state of non-precipitancy. Seneca brings in the sage's reservation in order to reject charges of precipitancy (cf. *temerarium*; 4.33.2.1, *temeritatem*; 4.36.1.6, and *temere*; 4.36.3.2) in promising a favor that, when the circumstances change, one must rightly withdraw, which is a situation even the sage cannot altogether avoid (cf. 4.39.3-4). Seneca does not deny that in promising, say, that she will go to a friend's dinner party, the sage commits herself to the view that this should be doable on that future evening. Nor does he deny that she cannot be certain of this future condition (4.33.1-34.2). And this would seem to open up Seneca's sage to the possibility of changing her mind and thus having changeable commitments of the precise sort that constitute ignorance (4.34.3). Yet the sage's reservation allows her to avoid such charges in two ways: (1) Her knowledge of fortune's fickleness informs any future-oriented view she holds by the additional proviso "unless something changes" (cf. *si potero, si debebo, si haec ita erunt*; 4.39.4.1-2). In this way, her commitment about the future remains true and consistent with present events. And (2) even though her impulse, e.g., to go to her friend's dinner party will change when it no longer remains possible or proper, this does not, Seneca points out, count as foolish inconstancy or precipitancy, but rather is a perfectly rational response to changing circumstances, which even the sage's mortal and incomplete knowledge cannot foresee (4.38.1-2). Indeed, as Seneca remarks, it would be the height of madness to persist in what one now knows is wrong (*demens est, qui fidem praestat errori*; 4.36.3.3-4). While the precise details are up for debate, the sage's reservation leads her to

never commit herself to an expectation that nature's fluidity could thwart, for she never rashly thinks certain something that may prove otherwise, while the fool blithely takes his expectations as a given.¹³³ The sage's worldview remains stable and sure even as it incorporates and navigates the necessarily unstable and uncertain.

IV: Conclusion

Throughout his philosophical works, Seneca often exhorts his reader not to find something paradoxical or expresses puzzlement over their surprise: "Do you think that this happens to you alone," Seneca scoffs at Lucilius, "and are you surprised [*admiraris*] as if it is something unique [*rem novam*] that you have not shaken off the melancholy and malaise of your mind by a long trip and a great variety of destinations" (*Ep.* 28.1.1-3). And to his friend Serenus Seneca cheekily remarks, "you should not find it paradoxical [*mirearis*] that no one can do that man [the sage] injury, for neither can one benefit [*prodesse*] him" (*Const.* 8.1.3-5).¹³⁴ Such expressions are more pointed and instructive than we might at first assume, for the fact that we find Seneca's works paradoxical is no mere effect of his style but rather a fundamental and defining marker of our ignorance. Nor is Seneca unfairly chastising us, demanding the impossible, or acting on bad faith as he demands our attention and directs us not only to make sense of each new paradox he constantly throws our way but even to cease finding them paradoxical in the first place. The paradoxicality in our experience, whether in reading Seneca's works or in navigating the world at large, results from a faulty worldview, but one whose main fault lies in inconsistency and conceptual confusion. As such, escaping paradoxicality rests more on getting clear about ideas we already hold or are unknowingly committed

¹³³ See Brennan (2000) on possible points of disagreement about the working of Stoic reservation.

¹³⁴ See also, e.g., *Prov.* 2.7, *Ira.* 2.31.4, *V.B.* 7.20.2, *Ben.* 7.26.3.5, *Ep.* 14.6, *Ep.* 42.1, *Ep.* 108.29, *N.Q.* 2.57.2, *N.Q.* 3.24.4, and *N.Q.* 4a.praef.2.

to, even if only in some inchoate form, than on learning broad swaths of brand new facts to replace past errors. Moreover, our ignorance breeds precipitate and careless thinking, such that we live our lives often unaware of the incongruity of our worldviews and experience paradox despite our present capability of seeing through it, if only we slowed down and stepped back, as it were, into a more comprehensive perspective and considered every aspect of our worldview.

As we have seen, Senecan paradox works with this in mind, but this process of integrating our worldviews requires time, attention, and repeated introspection, for even as one line of thought refines and reweaves some threads in a web of conceptions, others threads remain unexplored and unclear until some other line of thought brings these into focus. Progress towards wisdom is all the more difficult due to the inherent instability of our worldview.¹³⁵ Our hasty and reactive thinking leaves any headway we've made on an unsteady footing (cf. *in lubrico stare*; *Ep.* 75.10.3), and should we at any time lose focus, we may rashly commit ourselves to some view we, on prior inspection, rejected or some view that, on closer inspection, we'd find incongruous with more firmly held commitments.¹³⁶ Both of these difficulties are wrapped up in the fundamental dilemma that we have to integrate our worldviews from, as it were, within them. Every aspect of our experience – every thought, perception, and impulse – is informed by and reflects our worldview. We must come to see the world in its rational coherency at the same time as our ignorance compels us to experience it as paradoxical and disordered. It is this existential, experiential, or, as it were, onto-

¹³⁵ See, e.g., *Ep.* 75.8-13 and *Ep.* 87.2-6.

¹³⁶ Hence, for instance, Seneca's refrain throughout the *Letters* to "persevere" (*perseverare*) in his efforts at Stoic learning and progress (e.g. *Ep.* 4.1, *Ep.* 5.1, *Ep.* 16.1, *Ep.* 23.8, *Ep.* 34.4, *Ep.* 41.1, *Ep.* 71.36, and *Ep.* 110.7; see also Henderson (2006)).

logical aspect of paradox in the life of the fool that Seneca depicts, explores, and wields at his most original in his works.

The Fool's Experience of Paradox

For we now see as if through a riddling glass.
βλέπομεν γὰρ ἄρτι δι' ἐσόπτρου ἐν αἰνίγματι.¹

I: Introduction

Seneca takes a keen, if equally appalled and frustrated, interest in the fool's life. We fools, among which Seneca numbers himself too, live an unsteady and tumultuous existence, as our contradictory and vacillating thoughts and desires pull us in different directions. The world itself appears capricious and paradoxical, and we suffer as it foils our unreasonable hopes, contradicts our expectations, and terrifies us with the unforeseen. But as we saw last chapter, this paradoxicality stems wholly from the faulty state of our ignorant minds: our worldviews are incoherent and themselves full of paradox. The cosmos itself lacks any such disorder. Yet for us fools, this psychological and epistemic inconsistency takes on its own seemingly physical reality, for even as it is all in our heads, so to speak, we cannot help but experience the world as it is filtered through our foolish worldviews. While no paradoxical *thaumata* inhabit the actual cosmos, our ignorance imbues even many mundane matters with this deceptive thaumastic force. This chapter will explore how Seneca's philosophical works, especially the *Letters*, treats this existential aspect of ignorance as a facet of both his philosophical and also artistic enterprise.

Behind Seneca's handling of this feature of ignorance lies a highly creative adaptation of the respected yet competing philosophy of Platonism.² I will suggest Seneca's depiction of the fool's condition, while fundamentally and consistently Stoic, has a Platonic flavor: he presents our world through a pseudo-Platonic framing fitted to his own Stoic outlook. In

¹ 1 Corinthians 13.12.

² On Plato in Seneca, see, e.g., Donini (1979) 151-273, Setaioli (1988) 117-140 and 505-510, Setaioli (2007) 342-347, Tieleman (2008), Reydams-Schils (2010), Schönegg (1999) 73-132, Sedley (2005), Natali (1994), Wildberger (2010), Boys-Stones (2013), and Inwood (2008).

taking this view, I argue against two positions concerning Seneca's engagement with Platonism that influential scholars, in various versions, have held: (1) that Seneca's use of Platonic thinking demonstrates his philosophical syncretism, and (2) that Platonic language, imagery, and motifs in Seneca is solely literary or rhetorical, without deeper philosophical significance to Seneca's Stoicism.³ My position, on the other hand, takes Seneca's engagement with Plato as an integral component of his own fully *Stoic* philosophical account of the fool's ignorance *and* of his artistic endeavor to depict the results of this ignorance in the fool's life. This approach builds on the work of scholars such as Gretchen Reydam-Schils and Gareth Williams, who have argued for a Senecan adoption of or experimentation with Platonic modes of thinking that nevertheless remains essentially Stoic in nature.⁴

We will see, in particular, how Seneca consciously inverts the Platonic relationship between the metaphysical and the epistemological and psychological and reworks compelling features of Platonic metaphysics within a Stoic framework. For Plato, the unstable, contradictory nature of *doxai* (beliefs) reflects the shifting nature of perceptible reality, while stable and coherent *epistēmē* (knowledge) mirrors its object, namely intelligible Forms. But Seneca reverses this connection. The paradoxical world we experience results from the distorting lens of our inconsistent and fractured belief-based worldview. Our ignorance renders our world in its image. Through this Platonizing framework Seneca makes ignorance and paradoxicality an existential problem for us fools, not because reality itself is somehow deficient or problematic, but because our ignorance makes it seem so.

³ On position (1), see, esp., Donini (1979) 181-185, Sedley (2005), Holler (1934), and Gersh (1986) 180-195. On position (2), see Inwood (2007b) 131-132 with Inwood (1993).

⁴ See Reydam-Schils (2010) and Williams (2012) esp. 5, 17-37, and 289-294. Cf. e.g. Reydam-Schils (2006) and Setaioli (2007).

Seneca does not break new ground in his position that our worldviews shape our experience at a fundamental level nor, of course, that one's epistemic state produces confusion or clarity.⁵ Rather, Seneca's originality lies, on a philosophical front, in his Stoic adaptation of Platonic ways of thinking to present these positions and to build an account of our experience of paradox that is unique within the Stoic corpus. On an artistic front, Seneca's use of Platonic language and imagery taps into an established distinction between an unstable, confused "world" of *doxai* and a coherent, orderly "world" of *epistēmē*. For Seneca, this schema offers him a potent way to characterize the utterly different *phenomenology* of ignorance and wisdom, in which the presence or absence of paradoxicality is paramount. In this Platonized framing, Seneca's exploitation of the highly polysemic Latin vocabulary to yield semantic and conceptual paradoxes serves both the philosophical end of singling out the role our conflicting views and conceptions play in our contradictory experience, and also the artistic end of fitting form to content, as the experience of reading the Senecan text itself, whose language draws our minds in contradictory directions, matches the phenomenology of the fool's paradoxical "world."⁶ In Section II, we will briefly lay the Platonic groundwork necessary to see, in Section III, the most explicit Senecan reworking of this Platonic paradigm in *Ep.* 71 and its artistic manifestations in samples from both the *Letters* and the opening of the *On the Tranquility of the Mind*. We turn lastly in Section IV to *Ep.* 58, whose final passages offer an encapsulation of the most substantive and unique philosophical fruits of Seneca's Platonized mode of thinking about our experience and which present a synoptic example of Seneca's Platonic appropriation uncovered in this chapter.

⁵ It seems to have been a basic Stoic tenet that impressions are immediately conceptualized via one's reason, which is to say the conceptions that constitute it. See Diogenes Laertius 7.49-51 (=LS 39A), Cicero, *Acad.* 2.21 (=LS 39C), and Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.345 with Long and Sedley (1987) Vol. 1 240 and Frede (1987) 153-154.

⁶ On this verbal exploitation in general, see Chapter Two.

II: The Human Mind and the Nature of Things in Plato's Cosmos

Before turning to Seneca, let us first review the relevant Platonic position. In the *Republic*, Plato relates his epistemological and psychological theories to his metaphysical commitments. For Plato (through the mouthpiece of Socrates), belief (δόξα) and knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) are distinct cognitive powers meant to be aimed at two metaphysically distinct types of entities, perceptible entities (“what participates in both being and not being;” 478e.1-2) and intelligible entities (“what is,” viz. the Forms).⁷ Socrates introduces his distinctions between belief and knowledge in order to explain the case in the *Republic* of the so-called Lovers of Sights and Sounds (φιλοθεάμονες).⁸ These Lovers of Sights and Sounds fail in their search for knowledge because they mistake beautiful things – plays, artwork, people, etc. – for what is fully and in reality beautiful, viz. the Form of Beauty, of which these perceptible things are mere reflections or images (εἰκόνα).⁹ These beautiful perceptibles, being “what is and is not,” are the proper objects of belief, not knowledge. Any beautiful thing, Socrates says, can also, in another way, appear ugly.¹⁰ Perceptible entities are no more one thing, e.g. what is beautiful, than they are its opposite, e.g. what is ugly, since what they are differs depending on context or perspective. They are, as Socrates says, “ambiguous, and one cannot understand them as fixedly being or fixedly not being or as both or as neither” (479c.3-5) and, put more colorfully, they “roll around [κυλινδεῖται] as intermediates between what is not and what purely is” (479d.3-4). Only the Forms, in this case, Beauty itself, avoid

⁷ Unless noted otherwise, all translations are from Grube (1992) with slight changes. Belief and knowledge are “naturally suited for” (τέτακται; 477b.7) their respective objects. On the philosophical significance of this formulation, see Vogt (2012a) 51-70.

⁸ 475e-476.

⁹ On this relationship, see esp. Nehamas (1975).

¹⁰ 479a.5-7.

this coexistence of opposites and are invariably whatever they are, and thus only they can be objects of knowledge.

Serious problems arise, then, when we attempt to derive knowledge from consideration of what we can only opine about. Consider Socrates' description of the soul's cognitive power in the simile of the Line in Book 6 of the *Republic*:

When [the soul] focuses on something illuminated by truth and what is, it understands, knows, and apparently possesses understanding, but when it focuses on what is mixed with obscurity, on what comes to be and passes away, it forms beliefs and is dimmed [ἀμβλύνεται], changes its beliefs this way and that, and seems bereft of understanding. (508d.3-8)

Socrates identifies what is “mixed with obscurity” and “comes to be and passes away” with the perceptible world. On the one hand, at least some of the undesirable lack of clarity and vacillating instability of belief arises from our ignorance of what it is we're forming beliefs about. So, for instance, in trying to answer the question “what is good?” which is a question about the Form of the Good, many develop the belief that pleasure is the good.¹¹ As a result, confusion arises when they see bad pleasures, at which point they come to think that the same things are both good and bad. That is, they believe those pleasures that they agree are bad are also good, due to their belief about pleasure in general being good. On the other hand, even wholly accurate beliefs about their proper objects are bound to be shifting, contradictory, and paradoxical solely on account of the nature of perceptible reality. Take the accurate beliefs of The Lovers of Sights and Sounds. Even in their accuracy, their beliefs about the beauty of any given thing will be unstable on account of the changeability of the perceptible world. These matters necessarily appear beautiful in a way and ugly in a different way. This contradictoriness can be simultaneous: take, for example, the beautiful Helen of

¹¹ 505c.

Troy and stand her next to Aphrodite.¹² But it need not be: take a tailored suit that is dashing on an adult and, without any change to the suit, it becomes ridiculous when put on a child. Whether simultaneous or not, perceptible entities are liable to change what they are and involve contradiction, a feature engendered into the beliefs about them.

And thus, precisely because even true beliefs about perceptible entities are unstable on account of the instability of their objects, we must never use these objects as the criterion of the truth. In Book Ten, Socrates distinguishes between what appears to the part of our soul that perceives and the part that reasons. The perceptible world and everything within it act upon the part of the soul that senses. Socrates claims:

Something looked at from close at hand doesn't seem to be the same size as it does when it is looked at from a distance... And something looks crooked when seen in water and straight when seen out of it, while something else looks both concave and convex because our eyes are deceived by its colors, and every other similar sort of confusion is clearly present in our soul. And it is because they exploit this weakness in our nature that deceptive painting, conjuring, and other forms of trickery have powers that are little short of magical. (602c.7-d.4)

Yet if we reason (in this case, count or measure) in order to determine these appearances' accuracy and judge them illusory, then the perceiving part of the soul and the reasoning part hold, of some form, contradictory beliefs (cf. *δοξάζον* at 602e.8 applied to both parts).¹³ For Plato, it is at least partly the nature of perceptible objects and the perceptible world that causes confused and conflicting beliefs in us. We do have a certain "weakness" that opens us up to such deception, but it is not this weakness that does the deceiving. Those distortions "out there," water refraction and color shading, confuse our souls. Of course, when we consider our perceptual beliefs, we recognize the distortion and determine the truth of what we

¹² Cf. *Hip. Mai.* 289a-c.

¹³ It is a vexed question of what it would mean for the perceiving part of the soul to have a belief on its own, since a cognitive attitude seems to require some involvement (however minimal or passive) with reason. See, e.g., Kamtekar (2013), Shields (2014) 160-163, Wilberding (2013), and Cooper (1984).

see. But in doing this, Plato claims that we look at something other than these deceptive perceptible entities. For Plato, what we “look” at to gauge these deceptive appearances are the intelligible Forms.¹⁴ We misinterpret the world because we look at the wrong sort of thing to determine the truth: we seek the truth in the inherently contradictory and deceptive visible world, when we should rather look to the intelligible realm of Forms.

A final point: Alongside belief and knowledge, Plato also introduces the epistemic state of “ignorance” (ἄγνοια), whose object is “what is not,” yet he says nothing more in the *Republic* on this.¹⁵ And, as we know, this is not the Stoic notion of ignorance, which covers any cognitive state that falls short of knowledge and is thus changeable.¹⁶ However, for a Stoic like Seneca reading the *Republic*,¹⁷ those who hold beliefs like the Lovers of Sights and Sounds are, in this sense, ignorant. Even though they may accurately believe something to be, say, beautiful, in failing to recognize its relationship to the relevant Forms, their beliefs would count as ignorant, together with the intrinsic instability of these beliefs noted above. Of course, Plato never says anything like this in the *Republic*, but his descriptions of the Lovers’ beliefs as those of one dreaming (476c-d) – a common image in Plato to identify ignorance as non-knowledge¹⁸ – or of the condition of the prisoners in the Image of the Cave as one of ἀμαθία (518b.1) certainly leave ample room for this conceptual leap.

¹⁴ Since the “tools” we use in, e.g., measurement like “same,” “larger,” and “smaller” are not, according to Plato, part of the perceptible world. See, esp., *Phaedo* 100b-105b.

¹⁵ He contends with this rather puzzling notion in the *Sophist* and *Theaetetus*.

¹⁶ Not unlike the way Socrates talks of ignorance in the *Apology*.

¹⁷ That it is highly likely that Seneca had in fact read the *Republic*, see Tieleman (2008) and a more tentative Setaioli (1988) esp. 119 with Inwood (2008).

¹⁸ See, e.g., Burnyeat (1970).

III: Seneca's Platonizing Stoic Framework

Plato's discussion of optical allusions at *Rep.* 602c-e also serves as a direct link to Seneca. Within *Ep.* 71, which concerns the nature of the Stoic good, Seneca often alludes to Plato's *Republic*, among other Platonic dialogues.¹⁹ For our purposes now, the key Platonic allusion occurs as Seneca describes how it is virtue alone that determines whether something is good or not, with the paradoxical result, for example, that conquering virtuously and being conquered virtuously are equally good and beneficial. We fools find this surprising and unbelievable simply because we interpret our world through the lens of our viciousness. As Seneca writes:

Why do you find it paradoxical if to be burned, to be wounded, to be killed, or to be tied up is beneficial [*iuvat*], sometimes even satisfying [*libet*]? Frugality is punishment for the self-indulgent, work stands as a penalty for the lazy, the pampered pities the industrious, studying is torture for the idle: in the same way we deem those things for which we are too weak [*inbecilli*] to be rough and intolerable [*dura atque intoleranda*], forgetting that to be without wine or to get up early in the morning is torment for many. These things are not troublesome [*difficilia*] by nature, but we are fluid and feeble [*fluidi et enerves*]. Great things must be judged by a great mind. Otherwise, what is our deficiency will seem to be a fault of those things [*videbitur illarum vitium esse quod nostrum est*]. Thus certain things that are entirely straight, when submerged into water, give back an appearance of bending and fracture. It matters not only what you look at, but in what way: Our mind is clouded in respect to seeing the truth [*non tantum quid videas, sed quemadmodum, refert: animus noster ad vera perspicienda caligat*]. (23.1-24.6)²⁰

On its own, we might think Seneca's example of the distorted appearance of a submerged object represents a common trope.²¹ And Brad Inwood rightly notes that in its immediate context of *Ep.* 71, this passage specifically reveals the need for some stable measure of the

¹⁹ See, e.g., 4.4-5 to *Rep.* 506d-e, 4.7 to *Meno* 77a, §31 to *Rep.* 429d-3e, and 34.4-5 to *Rep.* 514-517. On different aspects of this letter, see Inwood (2007b) 182-200, Grant (2000) 324, and Hengelbrock (2000) 57-75.

²⁰ Cf. *Ep.* 104.24-26 and *Ep.* 115.6. Also, compare a similar claim in Epictetus: "The soul is like a bowl of water: just as a ray of light falls upon the water, so too do impressions. Therefore, whenever the water is disturbed [*κίνηθῃ*], it seems like the ray of light is disturbed, but it is not. And so whenever someone's mind is darkened [*σκοτωθῇ*], technical expertise and virtue are not confounded, but rather the [psychic] *pneuma*, in which those exist. When that stabilizes, so too do those" (*Diss.* 3.3.20-22).

²¹ Cf. e.g. Cicero *Luc.* 19.

good untethered from our own diverse faults and evaluations.²² But signaled by the other allusions to Plato's *Republic*, this passage takes on a broader significance as a conscious appeal to Plato.²³ Here Seneca most evidently turns the Platonic relationship between our beliefs and their objects on its head. Contrary to Plato, for whom our ignorance results from our mind's eye being turned towards the wrong thing rather than a defect of the mind,²⁴ Seneca puts the blame precisely on our ignorance as a source of distortion.²⁵ For Plato, water stands as a clear example of the omnipresent distorting effect wrought by perceptibility, in response to which we should direct our mind towards the lucid and truly knowable intelligible realm. Through their wisdom, Platonic sages transcend the intrinsic obscurity of the perceptible world through recognizing it for what it is, namely, an unstable image of something else. For Seneca, this distorting water stands as an analogy for our ignorant worldviews, which deform a clear, understandable, and ordered perceptible cosmos as they project their defects onto the world itself.²⁶ Through their knowledge, Stoic sages escape this shifting obscurity wrought by a defective mind of mere belief to see the perceptible world as it really is.

²² Inwood (2007b) 195.

²³ Although Hengelbrock (2000) 64 n. 37 says nothing on whether Seneca recognized the connection, he nonetheless notices it and suggests that Seneca's interpretation of the submersion illusion, viz. that it results from a "false judgment," stands as an "improvement" relative to the *sokratischen* position that uses it as an argument against an empirical (*sensualistische*) epistemology.

²⁴ *Rep.* 518b.8-519b.7.

²⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 110.6.2-7.2: "The turmoil [*confusio*] in our minds is just like that recognized by Lucretius – 'For just as boys tremble at and fear everything in the blindness of dark, so too do we fear in the light.' How so? Aren't we who are afraid in the light more foolish than any child? But this is not quite right, Lucretius, we do not fear in the light: we have made everything dark for ourselves [*omnia nobis fecimus tenebras*]." Cf. also, *Ep.* 115.6.5-7.1 and §9.3.

²⁶ Commenting briefly on this passage, Hengelbrock (2000) 64 locates the problem in our *betrachtungsweise*. Inwood (2007b) 196 misses this critical aspect of §24-25 (exemplified most at §24.2: *alioqui... nostrum est*). He explains Seneca's comparison to optical illusions as another example of where we need reason to correct for "the failings of contingent human experience." We use reason to recognize that the stick in water is in fact not bent, and we equally need to use reason (and not the senses) to decide our values. This is certainly part of Seneca's point, but §24.2 turns the focus only to the fool and hence limits the metaphor to the projected failings in the fool's experience, not anyone's experience *qua* human. Within the scope of this metaphor, the sage would in fact see the submerged object as it really is.

(A) Platonic Orientation and Stoic Ignorance in *Ep.* 71

Seneca's Stoic adaption of Plato, however, does not end here, for the way Seneca analyzes the fool's imperfect worldview in *Ep.* 71 frames the problem as one of mistaken orientation – not metaphysical, as it is for Plato, but evaluative – and our mistake lies more in confusion and conflation than in “mere” misdirection.²⁷ Plato seeks to reorient our mind's eye, Seneca to integrate competing orientations. However, in line with Seneca's rejection of the Platonic metaphysics of *doxa* and *epistēmē*, even as he adapts the epistemological and phenomenological side of this picture, proper Stoic “orientation” effects a unification of our disordered worldviews and a remedy for our ignorance, which Seneca defines in *Ep.* 71 as a Platonically-suggestive “unsteady rolling around of the mind” (*incerta mentis volutatio*; 27.7).²⁸ The paradoxical “rolling around” (κυλινδεῖται; *Rep.* 479d.3) that Plato attributes to perceptibility turns out, for Seneca, to be a projection of our disoriented minds.

Seneca's programmatic introduction of the central problems of *Ep.* 71 at §5-6 reshapes the Platonic theme of psychic orientation in the service of three related Stoic positions: (1) virtue is the only good; (2) the fool's commitment to bodily “goods” obscures our acceptance of (1); and (3) the sage still values bodily integrity. Seneca argues in *Ep.* 71 that all goods, being so only on account of their virtuousness, are equal, with the result that, for example, the virtuous endurance of torture and the virtuous enjoyment of the spa are equally good.²⁹ Though wrong, we are not so unreasonable to balk at this claim, Seneca admits, for:

²⁷ Cf. Reydam-Schils (2010) 201, who argues that in general “Seneca uses the opposition between soul and body to underscore a genuinely Stoic reorientation in values.”

²⁸ For other examples of *volutare* and *volutatio* as a key component of ignorance, see *Ira* 3.27.3, *Ad Marc.* 11.5, *V.B.* 24.4, *Tranq.* 2.10, *N.Q.* 1.praef.2, *N.Q.* 5.18.16, *Ep.* 22.8, *Ep.* 48.8, *Ep.* 79.12, *Ep.* 99.9, *Ep.* 101.9.

²⁹ Seneca discusses the two-tiered Stoic hierarchy between goodness and indifferents of value and disvalue earlier in *Ep.* 66. On the philosophical aspects of *Ep.* 66 and *Ep.* 71, see Inwood (2007b) 155-200. On Stoic goodness and value, see Chs. 58 and 60 in Long and Sedley (1987) with Frede (1999a) and Vogt (2007, 2014b). On *honestum* in Seneca, see Wildberger (2014) 318-322.

We [Stoics] seem to many to promise more than the human condition allows, and not unjustifiably, for they look to the body. Let them turn back to the mind: then they will measure man by the standard of a god [*Revertantur ad animum: iam hominem deo metientur*]. (6.1-4)³⁰

While this conceptual paradox (*hominem deo metientur*) turns on the Stoic notion of the capacity for human's perfectible reason to match that of god's perfect reason,³¹ Seneca's command resembles Plato's repeated refrains to look to the Forms to judge the truth by reason and not to perceptibles to judge by sensation.³² But Seneca rejects Plato's metaphysical distinction between the perceptible and the intelligible and, with it, the circumscription of perception to *doxa* and (pure) intellection to *epistēmē*.³³ Instead, this language articulates a shift in the perspective or evaluative framework through which we view the same physical state of affairs: through one, which uses bodily states – especially pleasure, pain, and vitality – as the measure of good or bad, we reject as impossible the supposed beneficence (*inuat*; 23.1) of rightly enduring pain, which we accept through the other perspective, which measures the good in relation to mental states – viz. virtue and vice.³⁴

Seneca's language at §6.3 of us “turning *back*” (*revertantur*) to the standard of the mind remakes the Platonic motif of focusing the soul in the right direction into a Stoic image of the ignorant mind's lack of unidirectional normative focus. We recognize the goodness of virtue but are distracted and confused by the more immediate evaluation of matters via their

³⁰ Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 4.28.

³¹ See, e.g., *Ep.* 41, *Ep.* 45.9, and *Ep.* 124.14 with Inwood (2007b) 186. Cf. *N.Q.* 1.praef.5-6, 12, and 17.

³² E.g. *Rep.* 508d.3-8, 517d, and 529a-b. Compare the same sentiment expressed without the Platonic language in *Ep.* 92.25.3-6: “These conditions [sc. of the sage, viz. not being in need at all of the future, obtaining the complete good every moment, etc.] seem unbelievable [*incredibilia*] to us and to surpass human nature, for we measure the grandeur of him in accordance with our own weakness and we give the name of ‘virtue’ to our vices.”

³³ See *Ep.* 65 for Seneca's orthodox metaphysical commitments and *Ep.* 106 for his equally orthodox recognition of existence proper as corporeal. Moreover, like the Stoics in general, Seneca thinks that one can gain knowledge through the senses – in fact, this is where first knowledge must come (*V.B.* 8.4).

³⁴ Cf. Reydam-Schils (2010) 201.

effects on the body. A perspective exists within our worldview that recognizes the Stoic truth of the equality of goods, but our other, faulty commitments that make up the perspective that “looks to the body” contradict it.³⁵ Seneca draws out this Stoic perspective later at §17 at the same time as he pinpoints and stirs up the conflict we are forced into by our inconsistent commitments:

Thus there is no reason that you should find it paradoxical that goods are equal, both those which are sought and those which we deal with when matters demand it. For if you accept this inequality [between goods] such that you number the brave endurance of torture among the “lesser” goods, you will in fact number it among evils. You will call Socrates wretched when he was in prison, Cato wretched as he digs again at his own wounds with more spirit than when he had made them, and you will call Regulus the most unfortunate of all as he pays the penalty for keeping his word even with his enemies.

Non est itaque quod mireris paria esse bona, et quae ex proposito sumenda sunt et quae si ita res tulit. Nam si hanc inaequalitatem receperis ut fortiter torqueri in minoribus bonis numeres, numerabis etiam in malis, et infelicem Socraten dices in carcere, infelicem Catonem vulnera sua animosius quam fecerat retractantem, calamitosissimum omnium Regulum fidei poenas etiam hostibus servatae pendentem. (1-7)

Seneca’s standard *exempla*, men whom we cannot help but admire for their seemingly superhuman disregard for what we think essential, speak directly to our recognition (if only implicit) of the unique goodness of virtue.³⁶ But, while passage may help us see that we do, in fact, “look to the mind,” it equally draws our minds to our concern for the body and the evaluative hesitation this cause. Thus Seneca juxtaposes Cato’s virtuous resolve (*animosius*) with the, as it were, viscerally disturbing language of his literal handling (*retractantem*) of his

³⁵ Cf. §4.1-4 and §14.1-2: “For us, [mere] disintegration equates to death, for we look at what is nearby. Our dull mind, which resigns itself to the body, does not look at what is beyond.” See also Inwood (2007b) 195 on §22. Seneca also sometimes uses the language of “turning back” to capture the fact that in our ignorance we fail to recognize, let alone live up to, our divine natures, and, in doing so, we stray from our lives’ proper and natural trajectory (cf. *Ep.* 50.5). Just as wisdom marks a reclaiming of our true selves (e.g. *Ep.* 41), so too does it represent a return to the way we were meant to see ourselves and our place in the cosmos.

³⁶ Cf. esp. *Ep.* 120, also Inwood (2007b) 195.

own entrails.³⁷ And he destabilizes our evaluation of Regulus' fate through the synchysis of language of contradictory valences: Regulus' laudable *fides servata* intertwines with its gruesome and unjust punishment by torture (*poenas... pendentem*; cf. *torqueri*), an injustice punctuated all the more by the central placement of its perpetrators (*hostibus*) who, at the same time, are the unexpected recipients of Regulus' faithfulness.

Seneca also repurposes the Platonic motif of criterial orientation together with his inversion of the Platonic use of the water illusion in *Ep.* 71 to argue that the seemingly paradoxical equality of virtuous acts arises not from matters themselves (i.e. as a [meta]physical issue), but from our worldview's conflation of two related but distinct conceptions: bodily vulnerability (our mortality and natural susceptibility to feel pain) and mental vulnerability (our unnatural disposition to compound this physical pain with mental suffering).³⁸ Seneca raises the issue of mental weakness (*infirmitas*; 22.6) when he suggests that we tend to think that anything our minds are too weak to handle without distress cannot, thus, be so handled by anyone else (§22). But, there are those whose mental weakness – viz. their beliefs that, e.g., frugality is punishment (*poena*; 23.2) or industry pitiful (cf. *miseretur*; 23.3) – makes undeniably beneficial matters distressing, even physically painful, for Seneca describes a pampered man as “tortured” (*torqueri*; 23.4) by the painless act of studying. Our beliefs have a distorting effect; they can make the painless painful. The patent viciousness of these men demonstrates our implicit decoupling of mental and bodily *inbecillitas*, for this crowd's contemptible weak-mindedness lies precisely in tying their mental states to their bodily conditions such that

³⁷ On Seneca's rather gruesome depictions of Cato's suicide, among other scenes, see *Ad Helv.* 13.4-6, *Prov.* 3-4, *Ep.* 13.14, *Ep.* 24.6, and *Ep.* 104.27-33.

³⁸ On the distinction between unavoidable physical pain and the mental pain of distress, see §27, *Ep.* 74.31, and *Ira* 2.1-2 with Inwood (1993).

what pains the body pains the mind or even, in a striking psychosomaticism, what pains the mind pains the body.

Seneca's conclusion that "in the same way [as these people] we deem those for which we are too weak [*inbecilli*] to be rough and intolerable, forgetting that to be without wine or to get up early in the morning is torment [*tormentum*] for many" (23.4-7) thus locks our attention on mental vulnerability as distinct from its bodily counterpart through a conceptual paradox turning on *inbecillus*, which carries both mental and physical denotations.³⁹ We think whatever we all are *physically* pained by (*inbecilli*) is, for this reason, mentally distressing and unbearable (23.5), without attending to the everyday counterexamples to this relationship. We already judge others by recognizing that one can be physically weak (*inbecilli*) without being mentally weak (*infirmi*). What are *dura*, *intoleranda*, and *difficilia* (23.7) *for the body*, due to its vulnerability, are not necessarily so *for the mind*. We must then look for some evaluative standard for what is distressing for the mind other than bodily affections or the judgments of our minds, which are confused on these points, since we project these faulty judgments onto the matters themselves (cf. *videbitur illarum vitium esse quod nostrum est*; 24.2).⁴⁰ Instead, we must turn to the virtuous mind and its judgments as the measure of truth in order to see these *same* matters *in a different way*, and in this way our minds may cease to be "clouded" (*caligat*; 24.6, cf. ἀμβλύνεται; *Rep.* 508d [above]). Seneca's Platonized motifs poignantly differentiate the modalities of evaluation via mind or body at the same time as his adaptation of these motifs identifies the source of confusion at the cognitive, rather than metaphysical, level.

³⁹ So, for example, Seneca uses *inbecillus* in its ethical and mental denotations at *Ep.* 58.36, cf. *Ep.* 7.1, *Ep.* 50.9, and *Ep.* 95.37.

⁴⁰ In the earlier *Ep.* 66.15, a companion piece to *Ep.* 71 (cf. Inwood (2007b) 182-183), Seneca argues that many matters are indeed *dura* and *difficilia*, viewed through the bodily perspective, but that this perspective does not dictate a matter's true goodness and thus whether or not they are *mentally* painful or unendurable.

Seneca draws together these two heuristic framings – orientation and conceptualization – in his description of the sage’s condition and consistent worldview. In strikingly Platonic language, Seneca writes:

I do not remove the sage from the census of men nor do I remove pain from him, feeling no sensation [*sensum*] as if he were a rock. But remember that a person is made up of two parts: one is non-rational.⁴¹ This is stung, burned, and pained. The other is rational, and this holds stable views [*inconcussas opiniones*], and is untroubled and unyielding. In this part, that ultimate good of humankind is located. Before it is fulfilled, there is an unsteady rolling around of the mind [*incerta mentis volutatio*]. When it is truly perfected, the mind has an unchangeable stability [*inmota... stabilitas*]. (§27)⁴²

As in §6 above, Seneca defends Stoicism from making demands that exceed human capability. The sage does not escape the *imbecillitas* that mortal embodiment brings (cf. §29), but she does transcend it by grasping that the human good consists solely in the remedy of her psychic *infirmitas* and an acceptance of her bodily vulnerability (cf. pain does not cause a “regret for her own [corporeal] nature” [*paenitentiam sui*]; 29.6). However, while the sage judges the “ultimate good” only by the standard of her perfected mind, the perspective that values the body remains in the sage’s worldview in a revised form. In a Chrysippean appeal to customary language, Seneca goes on to acknowledge that there are goods *for the body* (*bona corporibus*; 33.3), but that these, unlike virtue, are not good “absolutely” (*in totum*; 33.4), and while they do have a certain, variable value (*aliquod pretium*; 33.4-5, cf. *magnis inter se intervallis distabunt*; 33.5-6), they lack the distinction (*dignitas*; 33.5) of true goodness reserved for virtue.⁴³ The

⁴¹ Seneca does not here commit himself to a non-monistic psychology, for he claims only that man is made up of a rational soul and a non-rational body. As such, we cannot escape experiencing pain when the body is harmed or pleasure when it is benefited, even though it is entirely up to us what we think about such pain and pleasure. At §29, Seneca relates such involuntary movements to “pre-emotions,” which are reactions such as trembling or growing pale in the face of something threatening that even the sage cannot avoid undergoing, even as she never thinks that these threats are bad. Cf. Panaetius’ four categories of *pathē*: those only of the soul, those only of the body, those of the body but that involve the soul, and those of the soul but that involve the body (Plutarch *Lib. et Aegr.* 6.1-11). On this passage, see Inwood (2007b) 197 and Smith (2014) 356-357.

⁴² Cf. *Const.* 10.4.

⁴³ Cf. Inwood (2007b) 199. For the same argument put in the Stoic technical terminology of “advantages” (*commoda*) and “disadvantages” (*incommoda*), see *Ep.* 87.35-37. See also *Ben.* 13.1-2, where Seneca talks of “goods

sage's proper orientation to virtue involves a proper orientation towards bodily goods rather than a total disregard for them.⁴⁴

While Seneca's use of *volutatio* need not always allude to Platonic motifs, the abundance of Platonic resonances in *Ep.* 71 makes plausible, I suggest, an intentional allusive transference of Plato's description of perceptible entities (as κυλινδεῖται) to ignorance (as an *incerta mentis volutatio*) at §27.7.⁴⁵ At the very least, it does pinpoint a fundamental problem of Stoic ignorance that Seneca addresses in *Ep.* 71, and in translating it with a Platonic ring, I want to draw attention to how it encapsulates Seneca's reversal of the Platonic position. Due to our confused and conflicting evaluative perspectives, we fools lack the stable worldview of the sage. As such, our faulty minds vacillate between judging something good in its virtue and bad in its painfulness, a feature Seneca rhetorically emphasizes in his repeated attention to the paradoxicality of such matters.⁴⁶ Matters roll about between being good and bad only because our ignorance makes them seem so volatile.

(B): The Senecan Text and The Fool's Experience

Even as Seneca locates the source of our worldview's deficiency in our ignorant thinking about reality, in his exploration of the turmoil, vacillation, and inconsistency that attends the fool's ignorance, he often projects this contradicting instability into his depictions of the world of the fool's experience. He applies this Platonized framing to explore the disordering and, in particular, "paradoxalizing" effects of our worldview *from our foolish per-*

of mind, of body, and of fortune" at the same time as he recognizes that only goods of the mind are "benefits" (*beneficia*), while the other "goods" are rather "advantages" and "to be chosen."

⁴⁴ Cf. esp. *Ep.* 66.19-21, 25, and 36.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 48.8, *Ep.* 99.9, and *Ep.* 101.9.

⁴⁶ At §4.9, §12.1, §17.1, §21.2, §23.1, and §29.1-3. Cf. also *Ep.* 66.17.1-4, *Ep.* 74.30-32, and *Ep.* 112.4.2.

spective.⁴⁷ This approach attends to and illustrates how our ignorance actively obscures the truth, forestalls our progress, and traps us in the tumultuous thinking of our own making, in a way that works with the fact that we do not experience the world as something mediated by our worldviews.⁴⁸ To do so, Seneca carries his Platonized framing further in this, as it were, dramatization, and through his language, imagery, and other stylistic mechanisms he presents the distinct psychologically-dependent experiences of the fool and the sage as concrete, as if the constitutive power of their different worldviews create two different domains – one jolting and incongruous, the other smoothly flowing – in which they separately dwell. This dichotomy, both implicitly and explicitly, evokes the Platonic imagery between ignorant slaves still bound in the cave and philosophers who have managed to escape into the open air above.

However, our first passage, from *Ep.* 59, most explicitly analogizes the experiences of the sage and the fool to the heavens and the Vergilian underworld.⁴⁹ The underworld of *Aeneid* 6 is in many ways an obvious and attractive metaphor for the world of Seneca's fool. In the first place, it is a land of illusory insubstantiality, a "spectral realm" (*inania regna*; 269) populated by shades.⁵⁰ It is also tumultuous and paradoxical, not just to experience, but even

⁴⁷ Asmis (2009) 135 makes a related point in reference to Seneca's portrayal of *fortuna* as a terrible enemy and her and the sage in fierce combat, even while, *for the sage*, the indifferent "weapons" of *fortuna* are wholly unterrifying. Arguing against any sort of inconsistency, Asmis writes: "First, we must keep in mind that Seneca is presenting an ideal – that is, a model of behavior for those striving to attain virtue. In order to make sense of Seneca's vision, we must put ourselves – that is, the person addressed by Seneca – into the picture. From the point of view of the person who is still struggling to become virtuous, the attainment of virtue is equivalent to victory over the most awful afflictions. This is an illusory view, born of our ignorance; for even though the afflictions seem terrible, they are nothing but demons of our own making. The good person has wholly expelled these hallucinations; but we – the persons addressed by Seneca – are still prey to them."

⁴⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 94.25.5-6: "Often the mind obscures [*dissimulat*] what is actually evident [*aperta*]. An acknowledgement of the most well-known things [*notitia rerum notissimarum*] must then be forced upon this mind."

⁴⁹ On Seneca's quotations of Vergil in general, see esp. Mazzoli (1970) 215-232.

⁵⁰ See also the tree of *vana somnia* (283-284), *tenuis sine corpore vitas... sub imagine formae* (293-294), Dido *per umbras obscuram* (452-453), the Greeks' *tollere vocem exiguam, inceptus clamor frustratur hiantis* (493-494), the *imago, par levibus ventis volucrique simillima somno* of Anchises (701-702), and, of course, the exit via the gate of *falsa insomnia* (895-896).

in its very nature.⁵¹ While, for example, at 317, Aeneas marvels (*miratus*) at the surging mass (*tumultu*) of the dead – heroes, boys, unwed girls, and mothers alike – fighting to cross the Styx, Vergil’s readers and listeners are equally at a loss to make sense of an underworld that includes not only the traditional realms of eternally punishing Tartarus and blissful Elysium but also a mystical plain and process of purifying metempsychosis.⁵² Secondly, Vergil’s underworld and the *Aeneid* as a whole display a remarkably “philosophical” feel and draw on a diverse spread of ideas from, e.g., Stoicism, Platonism, Pythagoreanism, and the Orphic cults.⁵³ The *Aeneid*’s strongly Stoic ethos and the strikingly Platonic elements of its underworld make Seneca’s use of Vergil’s underworld as a focal point for his interweaving of Stoic message with Platonic framing almost natural and, perhaps, even to be expected, given the pride-of-place the *Aeneid* held in Seneca’s Roman milieu. That said, Seneca’s Vergilian allusions of interest here are not to those parts of the underworld that seem most Platonic – viz. the area for metempsychosis – but rather to general features of the underworld that, when mixed with Platonic motifs, paint a vivid picture of Seneca’s vision of the experience of *Stoic* ignorance. The mingling of Stoic and Platonic ways of thinking already in the *Aeneid* primes the (Roman) reader of the *Letters*, but does not prefigure the message.

In *Ep.* 59, Seneca depicts those fools who expect lasting joy from what cannot give it. He writes:

Everyone, I suggest, struggles towards joy [*gaudium*] in this way, but they do not know from where something stable and great follows: that man seeks it from banquets and luxury, that man from ambition and an encircling crowd of clients, that

⁵¹ For the (experienced) paradoxicality of the underworld, cf. 6.316 and 854. For its turmoil, see 6.317, 534, and 721.

⁵² On the seemingly inconsistent setup and workings of Vergil’s underworld and attempts to explain it, see, e.g., Habinek (1989), Solmsen (1972), and Zetzel (1989).

⁵³ On ancient philosophy in general in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, see Braund (1997). On Stoicism and Platonism in particular, see Gill (1997), Stevens (2008), Tarrant (1982), and Solmsen (1972), with Molyviati-Toptsis (1994) on Orphic and Pythagorean ideas.

man from a mistress, another from the insubstantial [*vana*] preening over the liberal arts and books that are in no way salutary. All these illusory and short-lived amusements deceive those men [*omnes istos oblectamenta fallacia et brevia decipiunt*], just as inebriation, which exacts a lengthy discontent for a single hour of cheerful insanity, and just as applause and the goodwill of favorable acclamation, which is produced and atoned for with great distress. (§15)

Our ignorance, not their natures, has made these matters empty and deceptive.⁵⁴ It is true that they provide both enjoyment and distress. Yet they deceive us because we deceive ourselves when we see them as lasting, enjoyable goods and are distressed when they become evils, but only precisely because we conceive of pain, labor, or obligation as bad. Seneca sharply highlights this paradoxical condition when he introduces this passage with, “you [sc. fool] seek joy among distress [*sollicitudines*]: those things, which you go for as if they will give you happiness [*laetitia*] and pleasure, are the causes of your grief [*causae dolorum sunt*]” (14.10-12).⁵⁵ Consider a vacation trip abroad: you think traveling is great – no work, change of pace and venue, and so on. You look forward to it with relish and imagine how happy you’ll be. But it’s also expensive, it requires planning, you’ll be away from friends and family; these are, of course, bad. So your pleasant daydreams about it are punctuated by these worries. The trip arrives, and you greatly enjoy it, but things inevitably go frustratingly awry, its cost becomes distressingly real, and the novelty naturally begins to fade as your attention is drawn more to the downsides of the trip. The trip hasn’t made you as happy as you expected nor for as long, and it’s disappointing. Still, you think, there’s always a next time – maybe it

⁵⁴ Cf. *Ep.* 118.7.1-4: “Yet ignorance of the truth keeps everyone in bad shape [*omnes... male habet*]. They are carried along towards something as if it is good [*tamquam ad bona*], deceived by common views [*rumoribus*], and then, once they have obtained them after suffering much, they see that they are evil or insubstantial [*inania*] or less than they had hoped for.”

⁵⁵ Cf. §2.4-8 and §4.4-6: “... nevertheless I call his affection pleasure, uncontrolled and tending towards its opposite right away [*in diverum statim inclinaturum*], moved by the belief in a false good, immoderate and unmeasured.”

will be better.⁵⁶ For the Seneca, this experience is driven solely by our evaluative commitments, and so long as we fail to recognize our own worldview's role in our discontent, we will see ourselves as the victims of deception by matters that seem to us to promise more than they can afford.

The turbulent state and experience of the fools in §15 picks back up a line of thought Seneca began at the opening of *Ep.* 59 at §3 through a quotation of *Aeneid* 6, in which Vergil numbers “the evil joys of the mind” (*et mala mentis / gaudia*; 278-279) among the monstrous forms of Death, Strife, and Sleep, who dwell at the gates of the underworld.⁵⁷ Only the sage truly undergoes *gaudium*, but Vergil still hits on an important point: “men delight in their own evil” (3.7).⁵⁸ And following §15, Seneca makes greater use of this Vergilian context, for when Lucilius objects to Seneca's denial that we fools experience joy, Seneca retorts, using the imagery of excessive feasting, that when our “joys” inevitably go bad, we bemoan this deception like the Trojans in Vergil's underworld, crying, “For you know how we spent that last night amidst false joys” (17.7-8 [= *Aen.* 6.513-514]). In his use of Vergil, Seneca positions us in our ignorant frustrations as if in the underworld among the Trojan dead, who lament their last night of debauchery that was the cause of their downfall. Seneca likens the world of the fool, filled with empty, deceptive, and paradoxical pursuits of our own making with that of the Vergilian underworld. Yet, pointedly, while the Trojans recognized their error once in the underworld, we do not (at least yet). The *luxuriosi* spend every night amongst such *falsa*

⁵⁶ Cf. *Ep.* 115.17: “If only those who desire wealth would consider this with those now wealthy! If only those about to seek office would consider this with ambitious men and those who have achieved the highest position of honor! Surely they would change their desires [*vota*], since at the same time those men [viz. the wealthy and honored] take up new goals since they now find fault with their earlier aims. There is no one for whom their own happiness [*felicitas*] proves enough, even if it comes quickly.” See also *Ep.* 118.5-7.

⁵⁷ Cf. quotations from the same Vergilian passage at *Ep.* 104.24, *Ep.* 107.3, and *Ep.* 108.29.

⁵⁸ Cf. Mazzoli (1970) 220. See also *Ep.* 112.4.2: “People love and hate their own vices at the same time” (*homines vitia sua et amant simul et oderunt*).

gaudia and do so “as if it is their last” (*tamquam supremam agunt*; 18.1-2).⁵⁹ We, Seneca suggests, repeatedly rush headlong into the very vice the Trojans wished they had resisted, even as we too, at least for a time, have such hindsight. The Trojans’ experience was above all a stroke of terrible luck, ours is a willing production of our own vicious ignorance.

Before looking at how Seneca subtly connects the Stoic fool as Vergilian shade to Platonic cave dweller, consider the more patent Platonizing of the Vergilian underworld as the fool’s “world” in *Ep.* 104. Here, Seneca passes from an anecdote about his own poor health and recovery through travel to a diagnosis of those who seek in vain to escape their unhappiness by fleeing abroad.⁶⁰ This brings no succor, Seneca rebukes, for, recalling *Ep.* 59.14, “you yourself sow the causes of your distress [*sollicitudinum causas*] through hoping for some things while despairing about others” (12.7, cf. §8). Likewise, in §9 we see that our vicious ignorance makes matters paradoxical.⁶¹ For example, in judging wealth good, an illusory (*falsa*; 9.3) poverty tortures us as our very opulence appears lacking (*deficit*; 9.4) by however much more wealth another has (1-4).⁶² Only a new and different sort of voyage – philosophy – will find a truly calm harbor through *magnitudo animi* (§13-23).

At this point, Seneca again quotes Vergil:

It [the wise soul] is master over everything and is above all. And so it submits itself to nothing. Nothing seems burdensome to it, nothing that might bend man.

⁵⁹ There is the additional tragic irony that Seneca often exhorts us to live each day as if it is our last (cf., e.g., *Ep.* 12.8-9 and *Ep.* 101.7), but these fools pervert that dictum in their vice.

⁶⁰ On this letter as whole, see Lemmens (2015).

⁶¹ Cf. §14.3-5: in their *inconstantia*, fools “desert those places they sought in the greatest desire in a greater desire, and, just like birds, they flutter about [*transvolant*] and leave more quickly than they came.” Seneca’s imagery likely alludes to the Stoic description of emotions (*pathē*) as “flutterings” (*πτοῖα*; see Stobaeus 2.88-90.6 [=LS 65A] and Plutarch, *Virt. Mor.* 446f-447a [=LS 65G]) in their volatility.

⁶² Consider also that in our crazed ambition (*furor ambitionis*; 9.9), which esteems social honors, we think ourselves failing so long as anyone else surpasses us (9.5-8), and that “peace itself will supply fears. Not even for those safe will there be any confidence when the mind is repeatedly startled, which, when it has made a habit of baseless panic, is unfit even for the maintenance of its own welfare” (*ipsa pax timores sumministrabit; ne tutis quidem habebitur fides consternata semel mente, quae ubi consuetudinem pavoris inprovidi fect, etiam ad tutelam salutis suae inhabilis est*; 10.7-10). Cf. *Ep.* 115.16.

‘Forms terrible to see, both Death and Toil...’
[*Terribiles visu formae, Letumque Labosque*; = *Aen.* 6.277]

Not at all, in fact, if someone is able to consider them with the proper eyes [*rectis oculis*] and to break through the shadows [*tenebras*]. The day turns many things that are taken to be a source of terror into an object of laughter [*vertit ad risum*].

‘Forms terrible to see, both Death and Toil...’
Our Vergil excellently said that they are terrible not in fact but ‘to see’ [*esse sed visu*]. It is a seeming, not a being [*id est videri, non esse*]. What, I ask, is in them that is as terrifying as common opinion has proclaimed? What is the reason, I ask you, Lucilius, that a man should fear toil or death? So often people come to me who do not think that anything is possible that they are unable to do, and they say that we recommend what is beyond what human nature can sustain.

Seneca’s twofold interpretation of Vergil’s description of the monsters of Death and Toil, who dwell alongside *Mala Gaudia* (cf. *Ep.* 59.3) in the underworld, turns on the distinction between deceptive “seeming” (*videri*) and true “being” (*esse*). Seneca’s *i* carries numerous resonances, but the Platonic element comes to the forefront as Seneca’s conclusions unmistakably evoke *Ep.* 71 and its inverted Platonic framing at §23-24.⁶³ As in *Ep.* 71 concerning matters that seem *difficilia*, we need only see Death and Toil in a new way, with an undistorted worldview (*rectis oculis*), to dispel their seeming evil. Our adoption of faulty views (cf. *fama vulgavit*), not the nature of Death and Toil themselves, obscures the truth. Seneca leaves little doubt that we should read §24-26 with *Ep.* 71 in mind when he declares in summary at §26.5-6 that “we lack courage not because some matters are troublesome [*difficilia*], but matters are troublesome because we lack courage” (26.5-6).⁶⁴ The ignorant are like Aeneas, who, when he sees these shades in the underworld, fears them and attempts an attack, until his wiser friends (*docta comes*; 6.292) point out that these hollow images of a form (*cava sub imagine formae*; 6.294) are unassailable. Yet in the suggestively Platonic language of “images of a

⁶³ On the Platonic distinction between seeming and being, see esp. *Rep.* 10.597e-598c, 10.602c-e, and *Prot.* 356d. This distinction, especially paired with talk of *tenebrae*, also has Lucretian resonances (cf. Reinhardt (2015) on “seeming” in Lucretius). Lemmens (2015) 306-307 suggests that Seneca interprets Vergil to be in line with the “Socratic tradition” in which the senses deceive us. On the Lucretian motif of ignorance and anxiety in *tenebrae* within this passage, see *D.N.R.* 2.55-56 and *Ep.* 110.7 with Lemmens (2015) 305, cf. more broadly Williams (2015a). On the “philosophical” nature of Seneca’s interpretation, see Mazzoli (1970) 222.

⁶⁴ Cf. Lemmens (2015) 319.

form” of Vergil, Aeneas fails to recognize that he moves through a domain of insubstantiality, while, in analogizing the fool’s experience of the real world to that of Aeneas in the underworld, Seneca presents us fools as struggling in a world of insubstantial “seeming” not in fact, but only as manifested by our deceiving worldviews.⁶⁵

While the quotations from the *Aeneid* in *Ep.* 59 lack the explicitly Platonic flavoring of those in *Ep.* 104, Seneca nonetheless nudges the reader’s mind towards this thematic overlap by bridging the *Aeneid* quotations with Platonic metaphors. Following his terminological refinement between *voluptas* and *gaudium* from §1-4, in which the Vergilian quotation introduces the programmatic topic that we fools take pleasure in the very things that distress us, Seneca uses a critique of the previous letter from Lucilius to discuss the proper use of analogies (*imagines* and *parabola*) (§4-9). This ends with the following Platonic imagery:

Many [vices] bind us. Many weaken us. We have wallowed in these vices for so long that they are difficult to wash out. For we have not just been stained, but dyed.

Nos multa alligant, multa debilitant. Diu in istis vitiis iacuimus, elui difficile est; non enim inquinati sumus sed infecti. (9.1-3)

This quick series of metaphor allude to the Platonic fettered soul of Plato’s *Phaedo* and *Republic*,⁶⁶ the cathartic release from these chains,⁶⁷ and the language of coloration – used to describe the Guardians of the *Republic* – to account for the difficulty of this psychic ablution.⁶⁸

Seneca uses these images as a transition to an argument from §9-13 that the tight grip of vice

⁶⁵ On the Platonic allusion in this passage of the *Aeneid*, see Tarrant (1982) 54. Cf. *Ep.* 76.33-35, where Seneca again uses a quotation from Vergil’s underworld (*Aen.* 6.103-105) to discuss how “the empty fears of the human mind” (*vanas humanarum formidines mentium*; 33.5) stir up the fool’s mind in part because these events strike them with “a novel and paradoxical appearance” (*nova... et inopinata facies*; 34.3).

⁶⁶ E.g., *Phd.* 67d and *Rep.* 514a.

⁶⁷ E.g., *Rep.* 515c, *Phd.* 67d, and 82d.

⁶⁸ *Rep.* 429c.8-430b.6; cf. this imagery again at *Ep.* 71.31.5, and see Cicero *Fin.* 3.2.9, *Leg.* 1.37, and *Tusc.* 3.3 for similar uses of *inficere* and the ethical habituation of youths strongly reminiscent of Plato.

stems from our lack of self-awareness,⁶⁹ which returns us to the letter's main topic, for this self-ignorance blinds us to the fact that we rush after what harms us (cf. 13.4). §14-18, which contain the final Vergil quotation, continue and close on this topic.

Through mixing this Platonic imagery in with his Vergilian allusions, Seneca interrelates the image of the entrapping (self-)ignorance imposed by our vicious state of mind as the chaining of the prisoners in Plato's cave (or the embodied soul in the *Phaedo*) with the framing of the deceptiveness of our ignorant pursuits as the illusoriness of the Vergilian underworld.⁷⁰ And again, as in *Ep.* 71 and 104, Seneca's adapts this Platonic motif to his Stoic message, which shapes his Platonized presentation of Vergil's underworld accordingly. Plato's prisoners are chained by their embodiment in the insubstantial and misleading perceptible world, and they escape through literally transcending this domain and the confusion of their embodied senses. We Stoic fools impose our chains, our vices and ignorance, on ourselves. We "escape the body" only figuratively through a worldview unified in a proper evaluation of bodily concerns and a clear understanding of the human relation to the divine and the resulting normative ideals.⁷¹ Vergil's underworld thus represents our "imprisoned" experience of the world as illusory, deceptive, and paradoxical, which, in its own way, is indeed insubstantial in its distortion of reality, for it is only so as it seems to us – a distressing, incongruous construct of our disordered minds.

The fool's experience occupies the bulk of Seneca's attention in *Ep.* 59 and 104, but in his relatively brief contrasts of our state with the sage's, Seneca equally imagines this per-

⁶⁹ On this passage, see Chapter Four Section II.A.

⁷⁰ While Seneca's use of Vergil in this interrelation is unique, he may in fact have picked up the general idea from Plato himself, who writes at the end of the Image of the Cave: "Do you wish, then, that we should now consider these – in what way such people [viz. future philosopher rulers] might come to be and how someone might lead them up to the light, just as certain people are said to have gone from Hades to the gods?" (*Rep.* 521c.1-4).

⁷¹ Cf. *Ep.* 65.18-21, *Ep.* 41, and *N.Q.* 1.praef.

fect condition in metaphorically spatial terms. While the “world” of our ignorance becomes that of Vergil’s underworld and Plato’s cave, the “world” experienced by the sage in her wisdom is likened to a life “above.” In *Ep.* 59, although the sage technically lives alongside us, while we live in our hell, the sage in his wisdom stands apart from us “on par with the gods” (*cum dis ex pari vivit*; 14.3) and “like the world [*mundus*] beyond the moon” (16.2-3), always serene, unshaken, and full of joy.⁷² And in contrast to the *falsa gaudia* of the overindulgent, the unending joy of the sage is the same as that of the gods whom he emulates (*aemulos*; 18.3). In *Ep.* 104, Seneca prefaces his interpretation of Vergil (§24-26) with similar language. Nature, Seneca tells us, has given us a “lofty spirit” (*excelsum spiritum*; 23.4) that seeks to live most nobly (*honestissime*), not most safely, and which is “most similar to the world [*mun-do*], which it follows and emulates [*aemulatur*] in its mortal steps as much as it possible” (23.5-6).

Juxtaposed with the paradoxical unreality of the fool’s self-imposed experience as akin to that of the underworld or Plato’s cave, Seneca’s alignment of the sage’s life with god’s and the cosmos takes on a new dimension. The sage occupies an elevated position and, from this divine view, she sees the truth.⁷³ But she herself makes this “view from above,” and it results from a remaking of herself (cf. *te igitur emenda*; *Ep.* 104.20.2) through philosophy.⁷⁴ She does not escape obscurity, but dispels it. Unlike Plato’s philosophers, whose wisdom consists in recognizing the disorderly perceptible world as a mere image of something more, the sage’s wisdom sees the world clearly as it really is, and from this her tranquility and divine character flow.⁷⁵ She has followed through on Seneca’s advice:

⁷² Cf. *Ira* 3.6.1.

⁷³ On the “sublime” nature of this spatial coordination for the sage, see Williams (2015a) 179-187.

⁷⁴ Cf. P. Hadot (1995) 238-250 with Williams (2012) 17-47 on this perspective in Seneca in particular.

⁷⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 120.16.4-7: “In fact, so long as you are ignorant about what must be avoided, what must be sought, what is necessary, what is superfluous, what is justice, what is injustice, what is right [*honestum*], and what is

Remember this before all else, remove the disturbing disorder [*tumultum*] from things and see what each thing truly consists in [*in quaque re sit*]: you will know that there is nothing to be feared in these except fear itself. What you see happening for children equally happens to us, who are just slightly bigger children: we fear those whom we love, to whom we are accustomed, with whom we play, when they appear in masks: the masks must be removed not only from men but also all matters, and their proper appearances must be restored [*et redenda facies sua*]. (*Ep.* 24.12.4-13.5)

The calm and smooth-flowing life of the sage mirrors god's and the movements of the cosmos because she experiences the world as undisturbing and ordered, as seen through her accurate and correspondingly ordered worldview, and acts accordingly. She has not transcended "mere" appearances, but only what is true appears so to her, and thus her experience matches reality.

A second passage, from the opening of *On the Tranquility of the Mind*, directly injects us into the irresolute thinking of the fool who, in this case, is all too aware of his precarious mental footing.⁷⁶ From §4 through §9, Seneca's interlocutor Serenus describes his struggle to keep his thinking in check.⁷⁷ He is far along in his Stoic education but still complains to Seneca of an unnamed mental weakness (*infirmetas*; 1.4.2), "which hesitates [*dubii*] between two [thoughts/actions] and is not stably inclined [*fortiter...vergentis*] towards what is right nor towards what is wrong" (4.1-2). As an example of such wavering, he tells Seneca of the temptations of wealth. Serenus avows a love of thrift and appreciates its unassuming simplicity and practicality (§6-7). Yet, he laments to Seneca that his humble possessions lose their attractiveness when he sees splendor (§8-9).⁷⁸

wrong [*inbonestum*], this [sc. going abroad] will not be travel but clueless wandering [*errare*]." Cf. also *Ep.* 59.14.9: "You wish to come to this [joy], but you are lost [*erras*]."

⁷⁶ Cf. *Cons. ad. Marv.* §17-18 (on this passage, see Bartsch (2007)) and *Ep.* 53 through *Ep.* 57 (see Chapter Four Section III).

⁷⁷ On the historical figure Serenus and his character as interlocutor, see Ker et al. (2014) 177, Williams (2003) 12-13, and Griffin (1976) 353-355.

⁷⁸ Cf. Attalus' similar dilemma reported in a reported speech at *Ep.* 110.14-20.

Despite Serenus' avowed love of frugality, we can see the turmoil of his mind laid out in how he depicts such opulence as attractive on the surface but contemptuous in its character. As we view this scene through Serenus' eyes, his inner conflict is both projected into his environment and also into the language of the text. The gleaming gold of slaves' livery he sees outside "ensnares" (*praestringit*; 8.2) his resisting mind, which nonetheless attends with a hint of approval to the fine details of a *paedagogus* "rather careful in wearing his clothing" (*diligentius quam in tralatu vestita*) and servants "adorned" (*culta*; 8.3) with gold. The contradictory decadence already present in the rich pomp (cf. *apparatus*; 8.2) of slaves is accentuated by Serenus' awe at

a house where precious objects are tread upon and riches are scattered in every corner and the roof itself gleams and a whole populace is an attendant and companion of an inheritance going to waste,

domus etiam qua calcatur pretiosa et divitiis per omnes angulos dissipatis tecta ipsa fulgentia et adsector comesque patrimoniorum pereuntium populus, (***)

in which Serenus' appreciation of wealth (*pretiosa... divitiis... tecta ipsa fulgentia*) conflicts with the patent viciousness it inspires in its admirers (*calcatur... dissipatis... pereuntium patrimoniorum*).⁷⁹ Serenus demurs in his depictions, saying:

Why should I speak of the waters, crystal clear, which flow around [*circumfluentis*] the very dinner guests or the banquet worthy of its own stage [*scaena*]? This luxury in its great splendor flows everywhere and resounds around me [*circumfundit me... undique circumsonuit*], who has come from a long stint [*situ*] of frugality. (***)

But Serenus' rhetorical evasion only betrays his conflicted fascination, as he can't help but recall the beautiful indoor streams. Indeed, as fit for a grand *scaena*, this sheer and unnatural

⁷⁹ There is a certain irony in the viciousness of these precious floors, for elsewhere, Seneca commends Nature for putting gold and silver beneath our feet "to be trod and stepped upon" (*calcandumque ac premendum*; *Ep.* 94.56.4), meaning that Nature placed deceptively alluring gold and silver in deposits buried beneath the earth. Nature's virtue placed them beneath our feet so as to be out of sight (cf. *nihil quo avaritiam nostram inritaret posuit in aperto*; 56.2-3), while our viciousness puts them beneath our feet for the sake of admiration.

excess seems to strike Serenus with a sense of unreality and superficiality, but this theater proves powerful and all too real in its omnipresence (cf. *circumfundit...circumsonuit*).

In fact, Seneca grounds this seeming unreality in a Platonic subtext. *Praestringere* at §8.1 equally denotes “blinding” or “dazzling” – as it often does in Seneca – and is used in *Ep.* 71 in a Platonic description of a Stoic *proficiens* who cannot yet consistently face *fortuna*, “for [sc. his eyes] fall, spellbound by overpowering brightness” (*cadunt enim nimio splendore praestrici*; 34.5).⁸⁰ Thus, as if like a prisoner emerging from an inversion of Plato’s cave, Serenus emerges from his own humble home only to be struck by such dazzling wealth that his commitment to his frugality’s goodness is shaken:

My gaze falters a bit, but I lift my mind to face it [i.e. *luxuria*] more easily than my eyes. And thus I return no worse but a bit sadder, and I no longer walk so proudly among these worthless things that are mine, and a silent pang and doubt creep in whether these are better.

Paulum titubat acies, facilius adversus illam animum quam oculos attollo. Recedo itaque non peior, sed tristior, nec inter illa frivola mea tam altus incedo tacitusque morsus subit et dubitatio, numquid illa meliora sint. (9.3-7)

(Almost) free in his thrift, deceptive luxury threatens to rebind him. This clever reversal of the Platonic prisoner, who, though soon able to physically view each higher level of reality, only slowly and hesitantly recognizes what he now sees, reveals the confusion still remaining in Serenus’ mind.⁸¹ Despite his relatively secure commitment to luxury’s indifference, some perspective (cf. *acies*) within Serenus’ worldview is still liable to make him see wealth as a good in its attractive appearance.⁸² It is through this lens that Serenus hesitates (*titubat*) in doubt about what he sees – whether this splendor is in fact good. This is a less compelling

⁸⁰ Cf. *Rep.* 515c. On *praestringere* see, e.g., *Ep.* 71.34 and *Ep.* 110.17 with Inwood (2007b) 200.

⁸¹ *Rep.* 515c-516a.

⁸² Not unlike, for example, the famous scene of Leontius’ inner turmoil in Plato’s *Republic* (439e-440a). Cf. also, *acies animi* in *Ep.* 115.6-7 where Seneca describes clearing away certain “hindrances” (*impedimentis*) in our mind’s “eye” (*acies*), viz. our faulty evaluative commitments, that obscure our view of something’s true worth.

(though still present) view, for, as he says, he returns no worse, nor is he of a different mind (*nihil horum me mutat*; 9.7), even as the resisted temptation has unsettled him (*nihil tamen non concutit*; 9.7-8).⁸³

At the same time, Seneca's language of *attollere animum adversus* itself reflects this indecision, the *dubitatio* (9.6), that Serenus undergoes when faced with the deception of wealth. Seneca commonly uses *attollere* (*animum/se*) to capture the Stoic technical term ἔπαρσις for the psychophysical expansion that constitutes the emotion pleasure.⁸⁴ Equally, while *adversus* typically has an adversarial connotation, Seneca sometimes uses it as merely relational, particularly in the context of affections.⁸⁵ As such, the description of Serenus' contradictory vacillation is itself semantically ambiguous, for we may be tempted to take it to describe how Serenus' precipitate mind is quick to take pleasure in the very thing – the attractive yet piercing gleam of precious materials – that simultaneously overpowers, staggers, and pains his unaccustomed senses. Serenus' thinking expressed in his writing does not just conflict, but roils.

And so, when Serenus returns home, he describes his own possessions, once satisfying, as in fact *being* worthless (*frivola*), a concrete projection of his gnawing indecision about what he thinks good. Serenus' worldview, which inconsistently sees both frugality and luxury as good, renders the ornaments of his thrift and others' wealth a contradictory unity of opposites as his mind is torn between thinking them valuable or trifling, beautiful or shameful,

⁸³ Much of the language Serenus uses to describe his thinking – *titubat* and *morsus* – is used elsewhere by Seneca to describe the occurrence of *propatheia*, which are involuntary, emotion-like affections we undergo simply as a result of thinking (but not assenting to) the sorts of thoughts that, if accepted, lead to fully actualized emotions (for the language of *Tranq.* §9, cf., e.g., *lingua titubat*; *Ep.* 11.2, *sed hic morsus habet suam voluptatem*; *Ep.* 63.4, and *non est dolor iste sed morsus*; *Ep.* 99.14). *Concutit*, however, describes emotional affection precisely juxtaposed with the mere *motus* of *propatheia* at *Ep.* 11.5 (*etiam si non concutit, movet naturali in hoc facilitate corporis pronos*).

⁸⁴ See, e.g., *Tranq.* 2.4, *Brev.* 17.3, *Ep.* 65.16, *Ep.* 66.6, and *Ep.* 76.17. On the emotional ἔπαρσις, see *Ep.* 59.2 and Diogenes Laertius 7.115 (=LS 65F) with Chapter 65 of Long and Sedley (1987), Inwood (1985), Frede (1986), Brennan (1998), Cooper (1998), and Graver (2007).

⁸⁵ See, e.g., *Prov.* 1.5, 2.6, *Ben.* 1.1.7, 1.1.8, 3.4.2, 4.16.2, 6.4.3, *Ep.* 15.10, *Ep.* 81.25, and *Ep.* 120.10.

and good or bad. In reflecting this projected vacillation in the text, through ambiguous language and words of contradictory connotation, Seneca engages the reader in an experience akin to that identified in Plato's Lovers of Sights and Sounds, where (perceptible) matters, the objects of *doxa*, embody a unity of opposites. Yet while the episode of the Lovers of Sights and Sounds illustrates the natural unity of opposites of beauty and worth in perceptible matters, Seneca denies us this interpretation, as Serenus himself recognizes his tumultuous experience as a defect of his state of mind, for in response to it, he requests from Seneca a remedy for his own mind's *fluctuatio* (17.1-3).

IV: *Ep.* 58 and the “worlds” of the fool and the sage

Seneca's psychologized and inverted appropriation of Plato's metaphysics as seen in the previous sections appears in its most schematic form at the end of *Ep.* 58. This letter famously presents Seneca's reflection on a conversation he had with a few learned friends concerning Platonic metaphysics.⁸⁶ Towards the end of this esoteric discussion (cf. *subtilitas*; 25.1), his addressee Lucilius unsurprisingly demands to know how it is ethically beneficial.⁸⁷ While Seneca first blithely responds “not at all” (25.2), he goes on to allow that such study provides useful downtime (25.2-5) and, in fact, acts as an impetus for restraining our emotions:

In what way are Platonic Forms [*ideae*][i.e. the study of Platonic metaphysics] able to make me better?⁸⁸ What might I pull from these that might restrain my desires? For

⁸⁶ On the unusual setting of this letter, see Inwood (2008) and Inwood (2007b) 107-111. On the philosophy presented in it, see, e.g., Inwood (2007b) 111-136, Sedley (2005), Reydam-Schils (2010), Setaioli (1988) 117-140 and 505-510, Brunschwig (1994) 92-157, Caston (1999), Rist (1989) 2010-2011, Dillon (1996), and Donini (1979) 151-273.

⁸⁷ Seneca often uses this preempting objection as an opportunity to move from an ostensibly non-ethical or unbeneficial topic to its proposed ethical and salutary implications. See, e.g., *Ep.* 58.5-6, *Ep.* 65.15, *Ep.* 109.17-18, *Ep.* 117.19-25, and *Ep.* 124.1.

⁸⁸ Inwood (2007b) 131 suggests this question may be meant to recall Aristotle, *EN* 1. Regardless, we may think this is a strange question, whether within a Platonic or Stoic mindset, since consideration of Platonic metaphys-

instance, this very point, that all those things that gratify the senses [*quae sensibus serviunt*], that fire us up and provoke us [*quae nos accendunt et iniritant*], Plato denies being among those things that truly are. Thus these things are imaginary [*imaginaria*] and bear any appearance only for a moment. They are never stable and solid, and we nevertheless desire them as if they are going to be forever or as if we are going to have them forever [*tamquam aut semper futura aut semper habituri*]. We weak and fluid men endure among empty things [*inbecilli fluidique inter vana constitimus*]: let us send the mind to those things that are eternal [*aeterna*]. Let us marvel [*miremur*] as we fly above at the forms of all things [*rerum omnium formas*] and a god who dwells among them and takes care that he protects from death what he was unable to make immortal, as the matter prevented it, and overcomes the defect of the body with reason. For all things abide, not because they are eternal, but because they are protected by the care of a ruler: immortal things would need no defender. The creator preserves these by overcoming the fragility of the matter by his own power. Let us think little of [*contemnamus*] all those things that are of such value that there is doubt [*dubium sit*] whether they *are* at all. (26.3-28)

Scholars have argued over how to interpret Seneca's move here. For many, this passage provides critical evidence of Seneca's substantive adoption of at least some Platonic elements into his philosophy.⁸⁹ For others, this shows an unsatisfying philosophical opportunism on Seneca's part, where he puts forward a theory he doesn't actually buy into but still presents as a salutary thought.⁹⁰ Against these readings of §26-28 as a straightforward, if artistically embellished, presentation of Platonic thinking, I suggest that Seneca describes the fleeting and illusory "world" experienced by us fools as a result of our unstable and contradictory worldview, which, as we have seen elsewhere, Seneca often details through a Platonized framing. Here in particular, the *falsa*, *fallacia*, and *vana* entities that populate the literary and

ics (whether one comes to accept it or reject it) constitutes a movement towards knowledge, which for both schools is essentially related to virtue. But Seneca's sense of beneficial philosophical activity is more circumscribed and idiosyncratic, for he usually means it bears immediately on our commitments concerning value, the good, virtue(s), right action, impulse, and so on (i.e. what falls within the purview of the ethical division of Stoic philosophy and would without much argument be recognized as concerning our *mores*, cf. *Ep.* 89.14). While he recognizes that any philosophical study *can* be beneficial in this way (cf. *Ep.* 89.18: "I do not deter you from reading about these matters [viz. logic and physics] so long as you immediately relate what you are reading to your behavior [*mores*]"), he (like Epictetus after him) is extremely wary of our (supposed) propensity to get wrapped up in philosophical discussion for its own sake and the impression of useless subtlety this has left on non-professional philosophers, whom Seneca's works primarily address.

⁸⁹ See, e.g., Donini (1979) 151-273, Schönegg (1999) 88, Rist (1989) 2010, and Sedley (2005).

⁹⁰ The principle proponent of this is Inwood (2007b) 131. Reydam-Schils (2010) 211 takes this as Seneca's disinterested presentation of a Platonist view, but says nothing on what salutary role it is supposed to play.

metaphorical landscapes of the fool in Seneca's texts take on their most original, philosophically substantive form as *imaginaria*, not as Plato's changing, perceptible "images" of the intelligible, but as the uncertain, paradoxical products of our ignorant thinking, which do not fully correspond with the reality we actually inhabit and with which we interact.

Scholars who argue for Seneca's syncretism adoption of at least some Platonic views often simply assume the Platonic positions discussed in *Ep.* 58 are Seneca's own. Thus, for a recent example, David Sedley takes Senecan Stoic-Platonic syncretism as a given in arguing that *Ep.* 58 and 65 (which is also on Platonic metaphysics) provide "indications that this particular gesture towards syncretism is less his own idiosyncrasy than a sign of the times," and they "tell us about Seneca's Stoicism, and more specifically about its relations to his Platonist contemporaries."⁹¹ Before Sedley, one of the most influential proponents of Senecan syncretism, Pierluigi Donini, questions the supposed source of the Platonic views presented in *Ep.* 58. While he notes a division at §23.3 between "the section derived from a middle-Platonic text" and that of "Seneca's free variation" on it and the reported nature of the former section, he still takes it without question as representative of Seneca's own views.⁹² Yet, while *Ep.* 58 involves a careful treatment of both Stoic and Platonic metaphysics, Seneca writes nothing that, at least definitively, indicates his acceptance of Platonic metaphysics.⁹³ Seneca's enumeration of a Platonic metaphysical hierarchy at §16-22 explicitly emphasizes that these

⁹¹ Sedley (2005) 122.

⁹² Donini (1979) 199 n.3 and 169 n.4. Against Donini's interpretation, see Reydams-Schils (2010) and Setaioli (1988) 505-510.

⁹³ This is not to say that the Platonist metaphysics that Seneca presents does not demonstrate marked differences from the metaphysics of Plato's dialogues nor shows signs of substantive incorporation of non-Platonist thinking, for, as numerous scholars have shown, it certainly does (see, e.g., Sedley (2005), Inwood (2007b) 111-136, Gersh (1986) 181-188, Bickel (1960), Dillon (1996), and Donini (1979) 277-290). Against these attempts to make coherent sense of the Platonic metaphysics presented by Seneca, see Boys-Stones (2013), who argues that the description of genus and species and Platonic ontology are intentionally jumbled in order to illustrate that Platonists go awry in confusing dialectic definition for distinct ontological categories, hence violating Seneca's advice to Lucilius at *Ep.* 45.6 to distinguish *res* not *verba*.

are Platonist ideas,⁹⁴ and at §8.1-2, where the technical analysis begins, he presents the list at §16-22 as his “most learned” friend’s. Indeed, when this list ends with entities that fall equally within the Stoic ontological picture, Seneca notes that “these begin to pertain to us” (*haec incipiunt ad nos pertinere*; 22.2), and amongst them include two of the so-called “incorporeals” (cf. *incorporalia*; 11.2) of Stoic ontology: void (*inane*) and time (*tempus*).⁹⁵ When Seneca does present his own thinking earlier at §8-15 (cf. *quaerimus*, *dicimus*, etc.), even as he breaks from orthodox Stoicism in his approach and categorization, he does not reject the ontological primacy of corporeal entities that is fundamental to Stoicism in favor of the Platonic elevation of the solely intelligible.⁹⁶ He does deny at §15 that the highest orthodox Stoic genus of being – “something” (*quid*; 15.2, [= τῷ] – is necessary to capture everything that is, opting instead for the heterodox category of “what is” (*quid est*; 11.4). But his genus-species divisions within his supreme genus *quid est* begin with the basic Stoic division between what is corporeal and incorporeal (11.2), and nothing that follows is fundamentally at odds with Stoic ontological thinking.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ E.g. *Plato partiat* (16.2); *ponit Plato* (17.1); and *Platoni imputes, non mihi* (20.2). Cf. Bickel (1960), who argues that many of these sections are translations of some source text.

⁹⁵ I agree with Brunschwig (1994) 112 that *nos* refers to “us Stoics” and thus Seneca’s own position. Inwood (2007b) 126, on the other hand, remains aporetic on what Seneca means at §22.2, for the very first Platonic category, “what is” (*quod est*; 16.2-3), which Seneca equally accepts at §11.4, would seem to offer the sort of overlap of ontologies that §22.2 is supposed to indicate. Yet Seneca may have seen enough difference in the content and nature of the genus *quod est* that he posits from that the Platonist notion to see only a nominal identity. Such a distinction is readily apparent in *Ep.* 58: Seneca qualifies his appellation “*quod est*” with the caveat that it is “not terribly fitting” (*parum proprium*; 11.4) without giving such notice for Plato’s, which may suggest that even the nominal similarity is misleading (cf. Inwood (2007b) 114-5). Seneca also makes the inclusion of things both “corporeal... and incorporeal” (*corporale... aut incorporeale*; 11.5-6) central to his notion of *quod est*, while the Platonic notion turns specifically on involving only what is “intelligible” (*cogitabile*; 16.3).

⁹⁶ On Seneca’s deviation from the orthodox Stoic approach to ontology, see Vogt (2009). Seneca explicitly accepts Stoic corporealism in *Ep.* 65, and he argues from it on numerous occasions (e.g. at *Ep.* 50.6 and *Ep.* 106). Cf. Inwood (2007b) 120-123 and 127, where he notes that Seneca’s reports on Platonic metaphysics are not in his own voice.

⁹⁷ Scholars note that Seneca’s placement of plants among ensouled things at §10.2-3 is Aristotelian and not Stoic (Inwood (2007b) 117-118 and Sedley (2005) 123). True, but this says nothing about Seneca’s attachment to corporealism. Notice, though, that Seneca qualifies this attribution of souls to plants (“it is proper enough for a soul to be in even plants,” *placet enim satis et arbustis animam inesse*; 10.2-3). Perhaps Seneca acknowledges

When, at §22.5-24, Seneca returns to his own positions, following the Platonic hierarchy at §16-22 and immediately preceding the Platonic scene of §26-28, he again seems to adopt Platonic views. “Whatever we see and touch,” Seneca writes, “Plato does not number among what he thinks exist, strictly speaking [*quae esse proprie putat*], for they are in flux [*fluunt*] and in the constant process of loss and gain” (22.5-7). Yet in the following meditation on the fluidity of nature, Seneca takes up Plato’s *evidence* for the unreality of the perceptible world, not his conclusions, and a world that is in a continual state of motion and change is as much Stoic as it is Platonic.⁹⁸ Indeed Seneca’s discussion centers around not Plato but Heraclitus and his famously paradoxical dictum: “we do and do not step into the same river twice” (*in idem flumen bis descendimus et non descendimus*; 23.2-3).⁹⁹ Using Plato as a stepping-stone, Seneca returns to a famous predecessor of both Platonic *and* Stoic thinking on change, and Seneca’s language of flow (e.g. *fluunt*; 22.6, *praetervehit*; 23.5, and *fluvida*; 24.1) rather than “becoming” (*gigni*; cf. *Ben.* 3.29.4) situates Seneca’s thinking in a Heraclitean, rather than Platonic, setting.¹⁰⁰ And finally, Seneca closes this treatment with a cosmic perspective that, particularly within the Stoic context of the *Letters*, depicts a Stoic universe, even as it is not incompatible with the perceptible world of Plato’s *Timaens*.¹⁰¹ The cosmos as a whole, while eternal (*aeter-*

that for the present purposes this attribution will suffice, even if it can be quibbled with, viz. with the Stoic argument that it is really φύσεις that plants have, not souls (Hierocles 1.5-33, 4.38-53 [=LS 53B]).

⁹⁸ *Contra* Donini (1979) 179. On particular questions arising from cosmic flux in Stoicism, consider Sedley (1982) and Lewis (1995) on personal identity and Colvin (2005) on the influence of Heraclitean flux on Stoic psychology.

⁹⁹ On this dictum, see Kahn (1979) 166-169 and 288.

¹⁰⁰ For other uses of *gigni* in Seneca, see, e.g., *Const.* 7.1, *Ot.* 4.2, *Ep.* 18.14, and *N.Q.* 2.10.4. For the Latin *gigni* in a Platonic context, see Cicero, *Or.* 3.10 and Apuleius, *Pl.* 1.6.23. For the language of “becoming” rather than “flowing” in a Platonic passage on the flux of identity that in many ways mirrors Seneca’s at §22.5-24, see *Symp.* 207D-E. On the profound influence of Heraclitus on Stoicism, see esp. Long (1975) and Colvin (2005). For the influence of Heraclitus on Plato, see, e.g., Aristotle, *Met. A* 6.987a29, Colvin (2007), Robinson (1991), and Allred (2009).

na), also “changes and does not remain the same. For although it holds everything, which it has [ever] had, in itself, it holds it differently [*aliter*] than it has held it: it changes the arrangement [*ordinem*]” (24.2-5). Seneca identifies the key feature of flux in the Stoic cosmos that he repeats throughout his philosophical works with the language of *ordo*: it is always ordered by the rational law that is the imminent Stoic god.¹⁰²

(A): The “world” of *imaginaria*

Even if the Platonic scene of §26-28 does not represent Seneca’s adoption of Platonic views, we may still think he presents a fully Platonic standpoint as a salutary perspective, even if not true. As Brad Inwood writes, in §26-28

Seneca points to the value of becoming more aware of the low ontological status of physical objects... Such things are the focus of morally unstable desires, so that regarding them as to some extent unreal will, he thinks, make it easier to resist desire for them. Since Stoicism itself does not regard any physical object as less real because it is corporeal (indeed, just the opposite), this would appear to be a case of intellectual opportunism: the reason for valuing a view is independent of its perceived truth.¹⁰³

Inwood is right, it seems to me, that Seneca seeks to identify the sorts of entities we undergo emotions towards as in a certain sense unreal, which in turn helps us resist such emotions. But I will argue against Inwood’s interpretation of these entities as – at least on a final reading – physical objects in a straightforward, “opportunistic” use of Platonic tenets.¹⁰⁴ Instead,

¹⁰¹ Cf. Inwood (2007b) 130: “The position taken here on the mutability of the cosmos is phrased in such a way that there could be agreement between a mainstream Stoic (whose belief in the eventual conflagration and reconstitution of the cosmos is firm) and a Platonist who thinks that according to the *Timaeus* the world is eternal but changing in its configuration and details...”.

¹⁰² Cf., e.g., *Prov.* 1.2-3 and 5, *N.Q.* 1.14-15, *Cons. ad. Helv.* 6.8, *Ben.* 4.12.5, 5.6.5, 5.8.4, *Ep.* 16.5, *Ep.* 63.15, *Ep.* 65.9 and 19, *Ep.* 88.15, and *Ep.* 93.9.

¹⁰³ Inwood (2007b) 131.

¹⁰⁴ The *Letters* themselves seem to suggest that they ought to be read and reread as Lucilius (and the reader) make philosophical progress. Seneca often suggests the way one ought to read philosophically, and it seems implausible that these suggestions are not meant to reflect on reading the *Letters* themselves (on this self-referentiality in the *Letters*, see esp. Schafer (2014)). In *Ep.* 2, for example, Seneca recommends not only being careful to spend, as it were, quality time with “proven” (*probatas*) authors, but also to reread them (*et si quando ad*

in a way similar to the Heraclitean passage of §22.5-24 above, Seneca draws on Plato's well-known account of perceptibles as unreal, fleeting, and contradictory "images" (εἰκόνα),¹⁰⁵ but subtly shifts the identity of such *imaginaria* from perceptibles to our experiences of them – he takes up the phenomenology of Platonic perceptibles, but rejects the metaphysics. *Imaginaria* are, I propose, the intentional objects and products of our faulty thinking, which we experience as reality but which, precisely because of their inaccuracy, fluctuate paradoxically. In another Stoically adapted inversion of the Platonic metaphysical-psychological schema, *imaginaria* are wholly mental *qua* constructs of the mind.¹⁰⁶ In this "world" of *imaginaria*, Seneca, I propose, draws together in a way unparalleled in earlier Stoic sources the Stoic theory of a specific sort of intentional object, "figments" (φαντάσματα), and his Platonic "two-world" framing to encapsulate most vividly the existential result of the constitutive powers of our worldviews.¹⁰⁷ §26-28 is thus no mere "Platonic intrusion," but a forceful, if subtle, reworking of Platonic and Stoic modes of thought.¹⁰⁸

In the first place, *imaginaria* seem to be entities relevant only to the fool's experience. Seneca's discussion on Heraclitean flux from §22.4-24 speaks to a general human condition (cf. *de homine*; 24.1), but concerning *imaginaria* at §26-27, he limits his discussion to fools. On

alios deverti libuerit, ad priores redi; 4.4-5). Equally, while *Ep.* 2 suggests taking one message to "digest" each day from one's reading (§4-6), *Ep.* 33 famously revises this advice to read at least Stoic works as a coherent, indivisible message (§3-5), which seemingly motivates a rereading of the *Letters* so far in this new unifying light (on this, cf. Wilcox (2006) 112-114). If we take this dynamic to extend throughout the *Letters*, then the "opportunistic" reading of *Ep.* 58.26-28 need not be wholly ruled out. An initial "naive" reading may get one slightly closer to the (Stoic) truth – viz. that we overvalue mere indifferentes – in their devaluation in accordance with Platonic metaphysics and the subsequently better (in this case, less passionate) state of mind, while the deeper Stoic implications I argue for come through upon further reinterpretations and re-readings given additional knowledge of Stoicism.

¹⁰⁵ See, e.g., *Rep.* 511, 514-518 and *Tim.* 28-29.

¹⁰⁶ Emphasis on "Stoically adapted" here is due, since Platonic Forms are solely *intelligible* rather than mental, while in both cases the cognitive element comes to the fore.

¹⁰⁷ In fact, Graver and Long (2015) 170 translate *imaginaria* as "figments," although it is unclear whether they had the Stoic notion of figments in mind.

¹⁰⁸ Inwood (2007b) 132.

the one hand, *imaginaria* are those entities that incite emotion: they give us pleasure (*sensibus serviunt*; 26.6-7) and they *accendunt et irritant* us (26.7), a pairing of verbs Seneca only uses to indicate an excitation of emotion, a reaction limited to the unwise.¹⁰⁹ And, on the other hand, while we may think Seneca simply focuses on fools because of the protreptic nature of the passage, Seneca closes his description of the “world” of *imaginaria* at §27.5 by explicitly excluding from it all but us fools, for “we weak and fluid men endure among empty things” (*inbecilli fluidique inter vana constitimus*; 27.4-5). The ethical use of *inbecillus* as “weak-minded” appears again at §36.6,¹¹⁰ and Seneca extends the instability of matter (*fluida materia*; 24.1-2) in his Heraclitean discussion to us fools as a whole.¹¹¹

The term *imaginarius* itself also suggests an entity quite distinct from the perceptible objects of Plato’s metaphysics. Seneca uses the rare adjective *imaginarius* only three times in the extant corpus, and each time it indicates that something doesn’t truly correspond to what it is being called and in this sense is illusory.¹¹² So at *Ep.* 20.13, Seneca suggests that every so often Lucilius take up “imaginary poverty” (*imaginaria paupertate*) in order to train himself for the real deal (*ad veram*; 3) should it ever befall him. But this illusory poverty neither lasts nor

¹⁰⁹ Cf. *Ep.* 76, where Seneca talks of what we falsely believe to be good, “which provoke our desires” (*quae cupiditates nostras irritant*, 17.4). Seneca pairs *accendere* and *irritare* twice elsewhere, and in both cases they refer to the excitation of some emotion. In *Helv.* 1.2.4, Seneca explains his delayed consolations by his fear that they would only “provoke and enflame” (*irritarent et accenderent*) her grief. At *Ep.* 116.5.6-7, Seneca quotes Panaetius as saying that we fools are “provoked” (*irritamur*) by the *humanitas* of returned love or “enflamed” (*accendimur*) by spurned love.

¹¹⁰ See also *Ep.* 7.1, *Ep.* 13.6, *Ep.* 50.9, *Ep.* 82.23, *Ep.* 95.37, *Ep.* 116.5, *Ep.* 117.24. Cf. *inbecillus* in this sense in a Stoic context in Cicero *Acad.* 1.41. In this connotation, it translates the ἄσθενεια that marks the Stoic fool in Greek Stoicism (see, e.g., Galen, *Plac.* 4.6.2-3 [=LS 65T]).

¹¹¹ In fact, Seneca pointedly underscores our ignorant instability and that of the *vana imaginaria* of our experience with the oxymoronic use of *constitimus*, which, especially within Seneca, indicates (virtuous) persistence, constancy, and fixedness. See, e.g., *Ep.* 11.2, *Ep.* 13.3, *Ep.* 14.15, *Ep.* 15.11, *Ep.* 16.6, *Ep.* 22.16, *Ep.* 23.8, *Ep.* 24.3, 35.4, 52.2, and 56.3 (and these are just instances in the *Letters* before *Ep.* 58). Undoubtedly this use of *constare* reflects Seneca’s elevation of *constantia* as the virtue *par excellence* of the sage, at least in the *Letters*.

¹¹² *Ep.* 20.13.3, *Ep.* 58.27.1, and *Const.* 3.1.1. Before Seneca we have only one extant example of the adjective in Livy 3.41.2.1. Here, Lucius Valerius Potitus and Marcus Horatius Barbatus argue against the perceived tyranny of the Decemvirs and proclaim that they will not yield to their “imaginary fascies” (*imaginariis fascibus*). After Seneca, see Florus e.g. 1.30.14, Gaius *Inst.* e.g. 1.119.3, and Suetonius *Claud.* 25.1.3.

reflects the true need that constitutes poverty proper.¹¹³ One may not be entirely wrong to call this training “poverty,” but it is fundamentally an inadequate reflection of what its name signifies.¹¹⁴ However, as such, while the term’s connection to *imagines* makes Seneca’s use in the Platonic context of *Ep.* 58 fitting, the imperfection implied by *imaginarius* is quite different from that of the perceptible world in Plato. For Plato, perceptibles’ “imperfection” is ontological: only Forms “perfectly are” (τέλῳς ὄν; *Rep.* 597a.5).¹¹⁵ A visible sphere, for example, is imperfect in relation to its Form because it, strictly speaking, *isn’t* spherical (in the essential sense that the Form sphere *is*) but only “becomes” (γίγνεται) so. The visible sphere may be perfectly spherical and yet remain “imperfect” ontologically.¹¹⁶ While Seneca does not make explicit in *Ep.* 58 the non-Platonic sense of imperfection implied by *imaginarius*, this connotation becomes quite relevant when we consider Seneca’s use of *imagines* both in *Ep.* 58 and elsewhere.

Seneca uses *imago* in many of its denotations: for instance, an ancestral funeral mask, a simile, or a physical representation.¹¹⁷ But, *imago* also commonly denotes a mental representation, visualization, or conceptualization, which is typically in some way deficient in respect

¹¹³ Indeed this very fact leads Seneca to claim in *Ep.* 87 that even the sort of “true” poverty under discussion in *Ep.* 20 is not really poverty, since the sage has everything he needs even in this state of destitution.

¹¹⁴ See also “the illusory honor of words” (*imaginario honore verborum*; *Const.* 3.1.1) that Seneca denies he bestows upon the wise man through, Serenus objects, proclaiming him immune to injury when he simply endures it. This phrase and passage nicely encapsulate both the deceptive insubstantiality of such imaginary honor and the fact that this illusion of real honor stems from the ability to twist and misapply language.

¹¹⁵ It is worth noting that neither Plato nor Seneca ever call Forms “perfect” (for his part, Seneca calls them *immortales*, *immutabiles*, *inviolabiles*, and *infatigabiles* in *Ep.* 58 and 65).

¹¹⁶ See, esp., Nehamas (1975). In other words, Platonic perceptibles are “imperfect” not because they merely approximate the property of some Form they reflect, but rather that they imperfectly have, i.e. have accidentally but not essentially, that property. Hence, some perceptible object is imperfectly beautiful not because it is beautiful but not quite as beautiful as the Form Beauty, but rather because some perceptible object is not always and in everyway beautiful: it may be beautiful to this man but not that man, or it may soon cease to be beautiful at all.

¹¹⁷ As a mask, see e.g. *Ben.* 3.28 and *Ep.* 44.5; as a simile, see, e.g., *Ep.* 59.6 and *V.B.* 14.3; and as a physical image, see, e.g., *Ben.* 3.26 and *Ep.* 64.9.

to its referent, although it need not be.¹¹⁸ Although Seneca does mention the rare imperfect but possibly salutary *imagines*,¹¹⁹ inaccurate *imagines* are much more likely to occur and to mislead and degrade the quality of our lives, for they instantiate the errors and inconsistencies within our foolish worldviews.¹²⁰ In *On the Tranquility of the Mind* §12, Seneca warns Serenus of that feature of the fool's life he exposes in *Ep.* 59.15: we seek what will ultimately disappoint once obtained. We desire what, once attained, will only feed our desire for more and fail to satiate the desire's futile "emptiness" (*vanitas*; *Tranq.* 12.1.3). And, to add insult to injury, their attainment not only lacks fulfillment but also, in fact, brings dissatisfaction. In light of this, Seneca writes:

Let every effort be directed somewhere; let it aim somewhere. Deceptive images of things do not compel those made restless by hard work but impel the insane [*non industria inquietos sed insanos falsae rerum imagines agitant*]. For not even they are stirred into action without some hope: the impression [*species*] of some thing entices [*proritat*] them, and their mind so seduced does not expose its emptiness [*vanitatem... non coargui*]. In the same way, empty and insubstantial causes [*inanes et leves causae*] lead each person around [*circumducunt*]... (12.5.1-6.2)

When Seneca tells us to aim for something, he means something that actually is as it appears to us. We fools do act with something in mind, something that we strive for, but these objects are empty figments, *imaginaria*, or *falsae imagines*. Take the vacation trip discussed above in reference to *Ep.* 59.15: the fool, in his conflation of joy and novelty, excitement, etc., trav-

¹¹⁸ For an accurate mental image, see, e.g., *Ep.* 104.31.

¹¹⁹ *Ep.* 120 is the most important instance: here Seneca tells Lucilius that even the deeds of the non-wise can "offer us an image [*imaginem*] of virtue" (8.1-2). Yet this *imago* of virtue imperfectly mirrors true virtue, for while a fool may do something that rightly seems courageous, her ignorance precludes the act from being done in a truly courageous way, as the sage would do it. It will lack, for example, the right intent or the constancy bestowed by wisdom (cf. §8 and 10). *Ep.* 120 highlights the upside of the conceptual overlap discussed at *Ben.* 2.34-35, for, counter-intuitively (cf. *quod mirum fortasse videatur*; *Ep.* 120.8.3), the conceptually contrary yet deceptively similar occurrence of rashness (*temeritas*) can produce in the mind an *imago* of courage (*fortitudo*; 8.10), which can, if properly considered, lead to an accurate conception of courage and virtue (§9-10). On *Ben.* 2.34-35, see Chapter Two Section II.A. On this salutary aspect in *Ep.* 120, see Inwood (2005c) 271-301 and Wildberger (2006a). For additional examples of imperfect yet not deceptive *imagines*, see *Const.* 7.1-3, *Ira* 2.36, and *Cons. ad. Marc.* 24.5.

¹²⁰ Perhaps we can read Tacitus' famous description of Seneca's death as an *imago vitae suae* ("a reflection of his own life"; *Ann.* 15.62.1) as a double-edged allusion to Seneca's own predominantly negative use of *imago*. On the ambiguity of this description, see Romm (2014) with Griffin (1974) 27-29.

els in the expectation that it will satisfy him and do so as long as he engages in it. However, *this* trip the fool takes himself to engage in – this unalloyed font of lasting joy – has no true counterpart in the real world.¹²¹ But so long as he conceives of traveling in such a way within his worldview, he will continue to see trips abroad as this alluring (yet empty and deceptive) matter and suffer when it proves otherwise.¹²²

Beyond the term *imaginaria* itself, Seneca already hints at their identity as (*falsae*) *imagines* through his discussion of centaurs and giants earlier in *Ep.* 58. At §15, Seneca denies that we need to posit a larger genus than “what is” against “certain Stoics” (15.1) who argued along the following line:

In nature certain things are and certain things are not, and yet the following things that are not are contained within nature, things that occur to the mind [*quae animo succurrunt*], such as centaurs, giants, and whatever else when formed by an inaccurate thought [*falsa cogitatione*] begins to have a certain mental representation [*imaginem*], although it has no reality [*substantiam*].¹²³ (15.2-7)

Following Jacques Brunschwig, and in line with my interpretation of the Heraclitean passage at §22-24, I take it that Seneca here does not object (at least wholly) to this characterization of solely mental entities, but does reject the ontological conclusion.¹²⁴ And these fictional, imaginary entities call attention to the category of objects, figments, that, I suggest, includes the *imaginaria* of §26. As a number of scholars have argued, these centaurs, giants, and other imagined beings are what earlier Stoics called “notions” (νοούμενα) and “figments”

¹²¹ Cf. also *vanas imagines* at *Prov.* 4.10 and *vana gloriae imago* at *Brev.* 7.

¹²² Cf. *Ep.* 98.8-9.

¹²³ I borrow Inwood’s (2007b) 5 translation of *substantia* as “reality.”

¹²⁴ Brunschwig (1994) 113, *contra* Schönegg (1999) 85. Cf. Inwood (2007b) 121. Seneca’s objection to the account, as he tells us at §13, is only that it is used to support the necessity of a genus broader than “what is.” In rejecting this, Seneca only implicitly rejects the characterization of fictional entities as things that “are not” (*quae non sunt*), but leaves the rest of the description untouched. Of course, we may think that in rejecting “something” as the highest genus and thus wanting to fit fictional entities into “what is” (or leave them in ontological limbo like the non-existent figments that Zeno identified with concepts [see Caston (1999)]) puts Seneca into a difficult philosophical position, but that is a separate issue.

(φαντάσματα).¹²⁵ Notions arise from our mental manipulation – whether intentional or through mistaken thinking – of preexisting cognitive material: e.g., the notion of a centaur arises from our “combination” of the notions of man and horse.¹²⁶ While notions may represent something real, Seneca focuses solely on fictional notions, those that, like a centaur and giant, may be held in one’s thinking as its intentional object even as it has no corresponding referent in the world (hence one way that such thinking is *falsa*).¹²⁷ With this focus, this imaginary entity is equally a *phantasma*, which, as Victor Caston puts it, is “*what appears* (φαίνεται) when we have a non-veridical experience” (original emphasis).¹²⁸ A figment is a “seeming of the mind” (δόκησις διανοίας).¹²⁹ Dreamers and the insane figure prominently in Stoic accounts of figments. The friend whom a dream presents as currently before you is a figment, as is the murdered Clytemnestra who appears before a hallucinating Orestes.¹³⁰ Yet figments need not be so, as it were, cut off from reality. The Fury Orestes mistakes his sister Electra for counts as a figment, even though it has an existent referent, viz. Electra.¹³¹ Orestes may interact with Electra, but what he takes himself to be interacting with, a Fury, is a figment.

¹²⁵ See, e.g., Armisen-Marchetti (2014) 221-222, Caston (1999) 175-176, Brunschwig (1994) esp. 110-115, Wildberger (2006b) 94, and, more hesitantly, Inwood (2007b) 120-123. The precise relationship between a notion and a figment remains vexed, cf. Brunschwig (1994).

¹²⁶ Diogenes Laertius 7.53 (=LS 39D).

¹²⁷ Diogenes Laertius 7.53 (=LS 39D) suggests that all concepts (ἔννοιαι) are notions, for he says we arrive at the notions of perceptible objects through “confrontation” and the incorporeal *lekta* and void through “transition.” As such, many of our notions *qua* conceptions will have referents that actually exist.

¹²⁸ Caston (1999) 172, cf. 172-176. On *phantasmata*, see Aetius 4.12.1-5 (=LS 39B) and Diogenes Laertius 7.49-51 (=LS 39A).

¹²⁹ Diogenes Laertius 7.49-51 (=LS 39A). A “seeming” also seems to indicate a non-veridical impression (Anonymous Stoic treatise (Herculaneum papyrus 1020) col. 4, col. 1 [=LS 41D]), but figments in our Stoic sources are precisely *not* impressions, since “imaginings” (φανταστικά) are the delusional equivalent to an impression and have figments as their objects (Aetius 4.12.1-5 [=LS 39B]).

¹³⁰ Sextus Empiricus *M.* 7.242-6 (=LS 39G) and Aetius 4.12.1-5 (=LS 39B).

¹³¹ Sextus Empiricus *M.* 7.242-6 (=LS 39G). Admittedly, Sextus Empiricus does not speak explicitly of *phantasmata*, but he does speak of “empty attractions,” which Aetius (4.12.1-5) defined as the impressionistic imaginings of figments.

Mireille Armisen-Marchetti nicely demonstrates Seneca's identification of the fictional entities of §15 with figments and *imagines* through an appeal to the restless pursuit of *falsae imagines* in *Tranq.* 12.5-6 (see above).¹³² In the first place, §15 and *Tranq.* 12.5-6 share the language both of inaccuracy (*falsae*) and of the purely mental existence of *imagines*. Secondly, Seneca's remark in *Tranq.* 12.5 that "the empty impression of something seduces" (5.4) the *insanii* alludes directly to the canonical definition of figments as "that towards which we are drawn [viz. to accept as real] in accordance with an empty attraction [διάκενον ἑλκυσμόν] [that is] an imagining [τὸν φανταστικὸν], which happens to the melancholic and the insane."¹³³ However, *Tranq.* 12.5-6 depicts not only the, so to speak, medically insane as pursuing *falsae imagines*, but also those Seneca equally considered mad, the fool (cf. *eodem modo*).¹³⁴ Unlike any Stoic before him, Seneca extends, then, the Stoic notion of figments, under the terminology of *imagines* and *imaginaria*,¹³⁵ to not just the entities in the dreams, hallucinations, or gross misperceptions of dreamers and the insane but to the objects of our foolish thinking, whenever these objects fail to mirror their referent.¹³⁶ There is also something biting

¹³² Armisen-Marchetti (2014) 222. Caston (1999) 175-176 also identifies the fictional entities of §15 with figments.

¹³³ Aetius 4.12.1-5 (=LS 39B). On this passage and the notion of insanity in Stoicism in general, see Graver (2003).

¹³⁴ That all fools are insane was one of the most famous Stoic paradoxes (see, e.g., Cicero *Par. Sto.*) and one particularly prominent in Seneca (e.g. at *Ben.* 2.35, *Ep.* 41.8, and *Ep.* 94.17).

¹³⁵ See also, e.g., *Ep.* 13.12 and *Const.* 6.7, where Seneca describes a conquered city and its foolish and now wretched inhabitants. Among them are investors who have lost their ledgers (*tabellas*), "in which avarice gleefully hallucinates its wealth" (*quibus avaritia falso laeta divitias imaginatur*; 6.7.4-5, trans. Ker et al. (2014) 155). These investors are not utterly mad, for these loans on the books really do exist and are a sort of wealth. But, they still deceive themselves about the real nature of what they see: these numbers on a page are neither wealth itself nor worthy of delight. In their eyes, greed distorts risky loans into actual wealth, and even then they err, for true wealth has little to do with gold and silver (see, e.g., *Ep.* 87).

¹³⁶ Just as an impression in Stoicism is accurate (i.e. kataleptic) so long as it faithfully reveals its impresser in an unmistakable way, *even if* the cognizer isn't consciously aware of every detail of the impresser presented by the impression (cf. Frede (1987) 167-169 and 174), we need not think that an intentional object must represent every detail of its referent to avoid being a figment, only that it not represent the referent as having some feature it doesn't actually have. Thus, for example, should I be thinking about that cat crossing in front of me, the cat of my thinking is not a figment so long as I don't get something wrong about the actual cat, even if I don't recognize it as so-and-so's cat or a cat of such-and-such a breed. So long as the cat of my thinking reflects the

clever in this move, for the one other entity explicitly denoted by early Stoics as *phantasmata* are general concepts (such as, e.g., “human”), which “exist” only as intentional objects of thought, and these are precisely the entities they think Platonists incorrectly identify as Forms!¹³⁷ While I don’t want to push this too far, it is tempting to see Seneca playing with the fact that we might have expected, in the Stoic context of the *Letters*, to see the term *imaginaria* – a good translation of *phantasmata* – applied to the Forms, not their ontological opposites.

The world of *imaginaria* in *Ep.* 58.27 is thus no mere Platonic paraphrase, but rather a neat synopsis of Seneca’s philosophical and artistic appropriation of a Platonic outlook that remains consistent with orthodox Stoicism yet directs our thinking in an effective and original way towards the existential facet of our ignorance. The mistaken or inconsistent conceptions and beliefs within our ignorant worldview, in accordance with which our experience of the world is immediately conceptualized,¹³⁸ produce objects of our thinking – *imaginaria* or *imagines* – that are like Platonic perceptibles in both their insubstantiality (cf. *solidum*, 27.3 and *vana*, 27.4) and their fleeting mutability (cf. *ad tempus aliquam faciem ferunt, nihil horum stabile...est*, 27.1-3). Consider money: we seek it and take pleasure in it on account of our experience of it as something good and desirable, in accordance with our worldview. Equally we desire and take pleasure in it as something that we will continue to have and that will continue to satisfy us once obtained.¹³⁹ But, so the Stoics say, this thinking is erroneous on both counts. The

actual cat, whether incompletely or not, then the intentional object of my thinking is precisely that actual cat (cf. Aetius 4.12.1-5 [=LS39]), whereas should I have gotten something wrong about it, say, in thinking it’s a tomcat when in fact it’s female, then the cat of my thoughts would be a figment, and one quite liable to prove paradoxical should she proceed to do something unique to a female cat.

¹³⁷ Stobaeus 1.136.21-137.6 (=LS 30A) with Caston (1999) 176-179.

¹³⁸ See Diogenes Laertius 7.49-51 (=LS 39A), Cicero, *Acad.* 2.21 (=LS 39C), and Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.345 with Long and Sedley (1987) Vol. 1 240 and Frede (1987) 153-154.

¹³⁹ Of course, we may seek it in order to spend it (and hence not have it anymore), and it may satisfy us not so much in its own right but for its ability to buy other satisfying things, but nonetheless we seek it with the expect-

money we take ourselves to seek and have does not exist as such. Like a less drastic version of centaurs or the Fury Orestes sees in his sister, this money *as something good and enduringly satisfying* exists only in our minds. Again Seneca has inverted a Platonic picture; the world the unwise take to be real is *not* the perceptible world (at least as it truly is), but rather a “world” only in and of the mind.¹⁴⁰ However, like Orestes’ Fury, our figments of wealth will typically have an actual referent – we aren’t hallucinating our paychecks – but in the qualities essential to their being objects of our emotions and thus *imaginaria* they’ll fail to correspond to reality.

Moreover, not only is this experienced wealth in an important way unreal, it will also be paradoxically unstable, as a result of the epistemic defects that form it. On the one hand, since we are wrong about money in profound ways even as our perception still stems from interaction with the real world, the money we experience will often subvert our expectations. The “lasting” wealth we think we now have will prove paradoxical when we lose it, as will the “satisfying” wealth when, after we accumulate a sufficient amount, it ceases to have much positive effect on our state of mind (or even has a negative effect).¹⁴¹ On the other hand, in our ignorance, we aren’t just wrong about wealth, we are inconsistent about it. Seneca is well aware that most people recognize to some extent their precarious hold on external “goods,” even as they seek them and take pleasure in them as if they can last.¹⁴² Thus, “the

tation that it will remain in our possession until we decide otherwise, and even if we don’t take satisfaction in it for its own sake, we desire it and take pleasure in it under the assumption that it will continue to be a means to satisfaction.

¹⁴⁰ Of course the inverted parallel only goes so far. Seneca inverts the Platonic dichotomy between perception and corporeality and thought and incorporeality, but in his variation, ignorant thinking produces the deceptive, incorporeal “world” of mere thought, whereas for Plato the domain of the Forms is not the product of thinking but rather is only accessible via thinking.

¹⁴¹ Cf. *Ep.* 95.3.4-8: “Number yourself among those whom a wife, wooed with much effort, tortures, whom wealth, acquired through much sweat, upsets, whom power, sought by every stratagem and means, pains, and all others who had a hand in their own misfortune.” See also, e.g., *Brev.* 2.4 and 7.6-8. Lastly, consider the now famous study that found that making more than \$75,000 a year in America has little effect on one’s day-to-day happiness (Kahneman and Deaton (2010)).

¹⁴² See, e.g., *Brev.* 17, *Ep.* 24, and *Ep.* 72.8.

very pleasures of these people are anxious and disquieted by various fears, and, when they are rejoicing most, the distressing thought slips in, ‘how long will this last?’”¹⁴³ The money we rejoice in equally distresses us when it strikes us as finite, precarious, or otiose in its preservation.¹⁴⁴ In these moments, we experience money as both a source of joy and grief. Also, in the same vein as *Ep.* 71, our worldviews are such that we may be torn between seeing the same instance of wealth in both a positive and a negative light. Should we, in a moment of weakness, steal some money and then feel guilty about it, we will vacillate between seeing that money as a good thing, for all the reasons we have for thinking it so and hence stealing it, and as something bad, for all the reasons we think theft wrong and its fruit tainted and ill-begotten.¹⁴⁵

(B): The “world” of the *formae* and god

As was the case for the world of *imaginarium* in *Ep.* 58 at §26.6-27.5, the language of the rest of the Platonized scene from §27.5-28 disabuses the reader of its ostensibly Platonic nature.¹⁴⁶ The most pressing word is *formae* (27.5). While other scholars have not unreasonably taken this as referring to the Platonic Forms, nowhere in *Ep.* 58 does Seneca identify Plato’s *ideae* with the term *forma*.¹⁴⁷ And although Seneca often eschews terminological precision, *Ep.* 58 stands as one of the few letters where he makes it of central importance (cf. §1-7).

¹⁴³ *Brev.* 17.1-3.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. *Ep.* 112.3-4, *Ep.* 95.37, and *Ep.* 105.7-8.

¹⁴⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 112.3-4, *Ep.* 95.37, and *Ep.* 105.7-8.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Wildberger (2006b) 54-55, *contra* Setaioli (2015) 386 n. 58, who justifiably sees the discussion of god’s protection of the impermanent cosmos as an allusion to Plato’s *Timaeus* 41b and equally recognizes Seneca’s Stoic appropriation of this Platonic picture. My divergence from Setaioli, then, is largely one of the degree and the manner in which Seneca “Stoicizes” Platonism, including whether we should read these *formae* as literally some entity similar to Platonic Forms.

¹⁴⁷ See Sedley (2005) 134, Inwood (2007b) 132, Reydam-Schils (2010) 197, Setaioli (2007) 344 and (2015) 386, and Fletcher (2015). On the ancient use of *formae* for Platonic *ideae*, see Cicero, *Orat.* 8-10 and Apuleius, *Pl.* 1.5-6. Cicero also calls the Platonic Forms *species* (*Acad.* 1.30).

Within this context, Seneca's substitution of *formae*, where we would expect *ideae* (cf. §26.4), should strike us as significant.¹⁴⁸ Moreover, from §20-21, Seneca explicitly uses the notion of a *forma* – literally, an appearance – to explain an immanent form (*idos*), juxtaposed with his use of the notion of a “model” (*exemplar*) to describe the Platonic *idea*. We will turn in a moment to what we should take the *formae* of §27.5 to be, but for now the central point is that Seneca's surprising terminological shift destabilizes any straightforward reading of *formae* as Platonic Forms.

In addition, scholars have rightly argued that Seneca's introduction of god and these *formae* at §27.6-7 evokes the flight of the soul in the myth of Plato's *Phaedrus* (esp. at 247c-248)¹⁴⁹ as well as a cosmology reminiscent of Plato's *Timaean* (esp. at 41b).¹⁵⁰ However, these scholars further recognize not only that the picture is equally Stoic,¹⁵¹ but also that the language and imagery of §27.6-7 has close parallels elsewhere in Seneca.¹⁵² And these other “flights” of the mind represent in Seneca not some psychic escape to a domain metaphysically distinct from the world, but rather an elevation of thought and outlook that facilitates a

¹⁴⁸ Admittedly, one may argue that Seneca's change in terminology is due to careless and misleading *variatio* and support this point with the arguably misleading examples of the Platonic “primary genus” at §16 (on this cf. Inwood (2007b) 124 and Sedley (2005) 133-134). But it remains true that Seneca does not ever use *forma* to indicate Form, despite a number of chances, and he continues this specificity in the related *Ep.* 65 as well.

¹⁴⁹ So Inwood (2007b) 132 with, on a similar scene at *Ep.* 79.12, Reydam-Schils (2010) 200.

¹⁵⁰ See, e.g., Inwood (2007b) 130-132, Reydam-Schils (2010), Sedley (2005) 134, and Setaioli (1988) 126-140 with (2015) 384-389. Inwood (2007b) 132 describes the *formae* at §27.6 as “heavenly bodies,” which would make sense if we read *volitantes* with *formae* and have the other scenes of mental “flights,” especially from the *N.Q.*, in mind. However, this interpretation makes little sense with the qualifier *rerum omnium*, for what relationship between celestial bodies and “all things” would this genitive mark?

¹⁵¹ Thus, e.g., Inwood (2007b) 130 (“The demiurge here is as Stoic as it is Platonic...”), Reydam-Schils (2010) 199 (“Many Platonic-sounding notions in Seneca can be attributed... to a Socratic legacy which the Stoics had already made their own in the earlier era.”), and Setaioli (2015) n. 57 (“If, as I believe, Seneca is still moving within the frame of Stoic cosmology...”).

¹⁵² Inwood (2007b) 132 representatively lists *Cons. Polyb.* 9, *NQ* 1.praef.3-17, *Cons. Helv.* 20, and *Ep.* 65.16-22. See also *Ben.* 3.20.

true understanding of the physical cosmos itself, even as many of these passages turn on the same Platonic framing as §27.6-7.¹⁵³

At the opening of Book One of the *Natural Questions* (praef. 5-17), a sister-piece of sorts to the *Letters* at least in its identical addressee and roughly contemporaneous production dates (if not in theme and aim), Seneca lauds virtue not for its own sake, but for its ability to “release the mind” to see the cosmos as a unified, divine whole, undivided by the misguided perspectives of the foolish mind.¹⁵⁴ Such a virtuous mind “as it wanders among the stars themselves” (*inter ipsa sidera uagantem*; 7.4) sees the objects of mankind’s overwrought concerns as minor pieces – if not wholly illusory (cf. §9-11) – in the context of the cosmic whole. The mind “springs upward” (§11) to a position where it can see clearly the movements of the celestial bodies and begin to understand god, “all that you can see and all that you cannot” (13.9). Despite the Platonic undertones of this passage, Seneca does not present a mind that moves to a different, “truer” world of pure cogitation, but rather one that adopts a worldview that sees this world as it really is and investigates it as a self-conscious part of the unified whole.¹⁵⁵ It is no accident, I take it, that the centrality of this high-low axis in the *Natural Questions* and the flight-of-the mind scenes in both *Ep.* 58 (cf. *in sublimi*; 27.6) and also the equally Platonizing *Ep.* 65 (cf. *ad sublimia*; 18.3) is wholly lacking in the truly Platonic metaphysical hierarchy presented in *Ep.* 58.16-22, even though it played an important figurative role in Platonic thinking itself.¹⁵⁶ In this way, nothing within *Ep.* 58 keeps the careful

¹⁵³ For this solely cognitive interpretation, see Williams (2012) and Reydam-Schils (2010).

¹⁵⁴ On the connections between the *E.M.* and the *N.Q.* see, esp., Williams (2014).

¹⁵⁵ On the Platonic resonances of these passages that nonetheless do not signal a Platonic cosmology, see Reydam-Schils (2010), Williams (2012) esp. 27-23 and 289-291, and Setaioli (2007) 349-258, *contra* Natali (1994) and Donini (1979) 209-235. On the Stoic, integrative aims of the *N.Q.* see, esp., Williams (2012).

¹⁵⁶ Cf. e.g. the spatial metaphors, such as of the perceptible world as mundane shadows of the “higher” (ἄνωτέρω; *Rep.* 511a.10) intelligible entities likened ultimately to the sun and stars, in the image of the Line and Cave in the *Republic* and the similar imagery in the cosmology of the *Timaeus*.

reader from seeing the distinctly *Senecan* (and hence Stoic) implications of the ostensibly Platonic scene at §27.6-7.

In line, then, with these other passages, Seneca's encouragement to focus our minds on "the forms of all things" and god in his capacity as creator and sustainer directs us to consider the world as an entity unified and ordered by the formative powers of god and thus to use our reason to uncover reality, to break through the deceptive "seemings" of our ignorance to what really "is." Importantly, the intrinsic stability of god and the *formae* relative to the *imaginaria* forms the central contrast in §27.5-28, rather than between their true "existence" or not, even if, should my interpretation of *imaginaria* be right, they are unreal. Seneca himself makes no claims concerning the latter, Platonic metaphysical difference, only distinguishing *imaginaria* as neither *stabile nec solidum* (27.2-3) while god and the *formae* are *aeterna* (27.5). Seneca explicitly circumscribes the non-existence of what we perceive to Plato's thinking (*negat Plato...*; 26.8-9), and his conclusion at §28.4-6 that we must reevaluate what we are prone to overvalue establishes only the justifiable *doubt* one might have over their existence proper (*ut an sint omnino dubium sit*; 28.5-6). It is the evidence that leads to this doubt – namely instability – that drives Seneca's call for devaluation, not the Platonic conclusion that instability means non-existence.¹⁵⁷ Equally, Seneca's real focus in §27.5-28 is the awesome, active, and divine reason that is god, whose priority and power over all other matter demonstrate its far greater value. The *formae* immediately disappear from the discussion, in which god alone maintains everything else.

In this context, the *formae* act as shorthand for the true nature of what make up the cosmos, which we only grasp when we adopt the totalizing worldview that sees the cosmos

¹⁵⁷ *Contra* Inwood (2007b) 132 (cf. "However, at the end of 58.28 Seneca reverts to the markedly Platonic notion that impermanent things are less than real.").

as wholly ordered, pervaded, and constituted by divine reason.¹⁵⁸ In *Ep.* 65, a continuation of the Platonic discussions of *Ep.* 58,¹⁵⁹ the mind “in flight” dwells “in contemplation of the nature of things [*rerum naturae*]” (17.6-7). This investigation concerns the same sorts of cosmological and theological questions addressed in *Ep.* 58.27.5-28 but without any mention of *formae* alongside the principles of god and matter.¹⁶⁰ In Stoic cosmology, there simply is no need for ontologically distinct Forms, whether Plato’s separate or Aristotle’s immanent variety. Any particular entity within the cosmos is what it is and has the features it does because of god, who is not only its creator, but also the explanation for its nature, for every property something has exists solely as a result of the particular “tension” (*intentio* or *τόνος*) of the portion of divine *pneuma* (together called a “tenor” [*habitus* or *ἔξις*]), in which it consists and whose presence qualifies the object.¹⁶¹ Where Plato’s and Aristotle’s forms pick out what common entity is present (in some sense) in every instantiation of some quality that accounts for it being so, there is no such actual entity in the Stoic universe.¹⁶² A tree *qua* tree

¹⁵⁸ On the “immanence” of god, see, e.g., *N.Q.* 2.45.3, 7.30.3, and *Ben.* 4.8.2, with Setaioli (2015) 382-383.

¹⁵⁹ Scholars commonly treat *Ep.* 58 and *Ep.* 65 together as a philosophical, thematic, and stylistic unit: see, e.g., Boys-Stones (2013), Sedley (2005), Inwood (2008), and Donini (1979).

¹⁶⁰ Seneca does mention them as *exemplaria* earlier at §7 and §13, but it is unclear whether he presents them there as something he himself accepts as existent (cf. “to these [sc. causes] Plato adds *exemplar*...”; 7.1 and at §13 he precisely rejects them in their Platonic form as causes), and they do not appear at all when the discussion turns to what Seneca himself clearly subscribes to.

¹⁶¹ On this “tension,” see *N.Q.* 2.6.5, Philo of Alexandria, *Quod deus sit immutabilis* 35 (=LS 47Q), Nemesius of Emesa, *De natura hominis* 70-71 (=LS 47J), and Alexander, *Mixt.* 223.25-36 (=LS 47L). On “tenor,” see Long and Sedley (1987) 47M-T with White (2003) and, on it in Seneca in particular, Smith (2014). Technically speaking, some qualities are not the result of tension but rather relation (see Simplicius, *In Ar. Cat.* 166.15-29 [=LS 29C]), such as being a brother, but such qualities as conceived by the Stoics would be even harder to reconcile with the causal role a Stoic variant to Platonic Forms would have to play.

¹⁶² Cf. Caston (1999) 184-185. Reydam-Schils (2006) 91 objects to Caston’s argument and argues that later Stoics considered the “thoughts of god,” i.e. divine conceptions, to “guarantee that the quality of [for example] human-ness will be structurally the same in every human.” While I do not have the space here to contest fully this objection, the primary problem is that it is very unclear how such conceptions would actually work. Moreover, it seems to me that we can make sense of divine conceptions that play a formative role in the cosmos but that nonetheless must still correspond to concepts that are incorporeal (or nothing at all), just as human conceptions play a causal role in our thinking but also must correspond to some concept. And thus we’re basically back to the orthodox Stoic ontology elaborated by Caston (1999) (see esp. 212-213). The later Stoic discussion

will contain a portion of *pneuma* of the same tension as other trees, but they are nonetheless distinct portions of *pneuma*, and there is no entity other than god himself that accounts for this identity in tension (and, hence, nature).

The *formae* and the god who dwells among them at *Ep.* 58.27.6-7 thus identify the same objects – the cosmos and all its parts as differently tensed portions of divine *pneuma* – as the *rerum natura* of *Ep.* 65.17, and are distinct only in the Platonic framing in which Seneca couches *Ep.* 58.27.6-7.¹⁶³ And the superficially misleading Platonic language of this exhortation in fact coordinates the three dyads of Seneca’s adaptation of Plato that we have explored in this chapter: (1) the stable world of *epistēmē* (cf. *inmota stabilitas* [*sc. mentis*]; *Ep.* 71.27.8) versus the paradoxically unstable “world” of *doxa* (cf. *incerta mentis volutatio*; *Ep.* 71.27.7), (2) the coherent or inconsistent evaluative orientations and concepts within wisdom versus ignorance that give rise to such experience, and (3) the affective gap, as it were, between these diverse experiences.

Seneca’s use of *formae* allows him to draw on its evocation of Platonic Forms as the entities of a stable and true reality in order to juxtapose them with the fleeting and unreal *imaginaria*, even as this primarily serves to highlight the divergent experiences that result from the psychological and epistemic differences in wise and ignorant worldviews, rather than to theorize about ontology. The shift from the technical term of *idea* to the colloquial *forma* forestalls a strict identification of these corporeal *formae* with incorporeal Platonic Forms. Nonetheless, the use of the colloquial *forma* as an explanation for the particular immanent *idoi* earlier at §21.2 predisposes the reader to take *forma* at §27.6 as some individual thing’s

of divine thoughts seems to me to be an innovation in Stoic theology, cosmology, and physics rather than a departure from traditional Stoic ontology.

¹⁶³ Consider also an objecting interlocutor in *Ben.* 5.12.4 who argues that, given certain Stoic commitments, an ungrateful person is in fact unreal: “there is thus no ungrateful man in reality, and this is an [figment]” (*ita ingratus in rerum natura est nemo, et hoc inane*; 6-7).

“nature,”¹⁶⁴ even as this, unlike Aristotle’s *eidos*, consists in its corporeal, pneumatic tenor. Moreover, Seneca’s pronounced substitution of the untechnical term *forma* brings out its colloquial denotation of simple “appearance” (encouraged by Seneca’s earlier identification of *forma* with *facies* at §21.4), which situates our turn to *formae* away from *imaginaria* within the broader theme of restoring what we wrongly view as good or bad to their proper appearances (cf. *facies sua* in *Ep.* 24.12.4-13.5, quoted above).

But why call these *formae* “everlasting” (*aeterna*; 27.5), since something’s formative tenor only exists as long as it does (or, strictly speaking, vice versa), and Seneca accepts pervasive flux in the Stoic cosmos (cf. §22.5-24)? On the one hand, this designation forcefully encapsulates the nexus of properties – stability, lastingness, and substantiality – that distinguish the true cosmos and its furniture from the “world” of our delusory *imaginaria*. But, on the other hand and more substantively, the eternity of these *formae* pins down the precise aspect that is essential to this passage: they simply *are* the eternal, active force that is god as he providentially maintains the cosmos.¹⁶⁵ The divine *pneuma* in all its varied tensions is the means of the “care of the ruler” (28.3) and his “power” (*vi sua*; 28.4) on account of which everything in the cosmos “abides” (*manent*; 28.1).¹⁶⁶

Still, each thing’s *forma* is eternal in a subtly different way from the god of whom they are aspects. God is eternal in the straightforward sense of always existing, while a *forma* is

¹⁶⁴ For Seneca’s use of *forma* in this sense, see, e.g., *Prov.* 3.6, *Ira* 1.3.7, *Brev.* 19.1, and *Ben.* 1.6.3.

¹⁶⁵ Seneca’s depiction of god “dwelling among” (*inter versantem*; 27.8) these *formae* both obscures and suggests their identity, for while the immediate meaning suggests separation, *inter versari* elsewhere in Seneca often relates a subject to something of which it is a part or which is a part of it. Thus, e.g., *Ep.* 59, Seneca writes that the sage will proceed unafraid “both against and among [*inter*]” poverty, grief, ill-repute, and distress; see also *Ep.* 71.36.6 (*inter foeda versantibus*) and *Ep.* 56.7.4-5 (*versatur... inter aegritudines levem*).

¹⁶⁶ Note that the fact that these objects (the *cuncta*; 28.2) abide demonstrates they are not the *imaginaria* (which are, thus, not simply perceptible objects), since the inability to abide is their essential feature.

eternal in its preordination.¹⁶⁷ Every tenor that god assumes is part of the eternal, inexorable, and unchangeable nexus of corporeal causes (i.e. tenors) that makes up fate,¹⁶⁸ and part of the eternality of fate rests precisely in the fact that the interrelation and occurrence of these causes has been fixed for all time.¹⁶⁹ Put differently, every detail about any given tenor is, in some way, encoded in and determined by every preceding cause, all of which is contained within god, the “cause of causes” (*causa causarum*; *N.Q.* 2.45).¹⁷⁰ Any tenor, whether it exists now or not, is eternally set as what it is, was, or will be.¹⁷¹ While Seneca thus equivocates in his use of *aeterna* concerning god and the *formae* of all things, both senses maintain the stability of a coherent identity that distinguishes them from the *imaginaria* produced by our vacillating ignorance, a distinction that forms the definitive thrust of the passage.

This reading avoids a particular pitfall of another intriguing line of thought arguing for Seneca’s supposed adoption of Platonic Forms. Scholars such as Anthony Long and Gretchen Reydams-Schils have suggested that later Stoics wishing to coopt Platonic Forms could have made room in their system through the use of their theory of “seminal principles” (λόγοι σπερματικοί).¹⁷² These principles are, according to Long and Sedley, “the mode of god’s activity in matter, a rational pattern of constructive growth which is both the life of

¹⁶⁷ For this sense of *aeterna* in other Stoic sources, see, esp. Cicero, *Fat.* (e.g. at 21, 28, and 33), with Bobzien (1998) 70 n. 26.

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Aristocles in Eusebius, *Pr. Ev.* 15.14.2 (=LS 46G) and Gellius, *N.A.* 7.2.3 with Bobzien (1998) 45-58.

¹⁶⁹ Bobzien (1998) 49. Cf. *Prov.* 5.6-7 and *N.Q.* 3.29.2-3.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Aristocles in Eusebius, *Pr. Ev.* 15.14.2 (=LS 46G) with Meyer (2009) and Bobzien (1998) 54-55. It is this “encoding” that the Stoics’ talk of “seminal principles” (see below) explains and thus seems to (but need not necessarily) suggest something like a form. But this intuition, it seems to me, may simply be the result of our natural way of thinking about such “encoding” as some sort of pattern or blueprint, and hence something generic (if not also immaterial). If we keep in mind the possible correlate of DNA, we can better see that the role of a seminal principle-cum-pattern need not be played by some generic entity.

¹⁷¹ Cf. *N.Q.* 3.29.2-3.

¹⁷² Long (1986) 228 and Reydams-Schils (2010) 197-199; cf. Donini (1979) 278-280. On seminal principles, see Aetius 1.7.33 (=LS 46A), Aristocles in Eusebius *Pr. Ev.* 15.14.2 (=LS 46G), Diogenes Laertius 7.148-9 (=LS 43A), and Stobaeus 2.82.11 (=SVF 3.141) with Long and Sedley (1987) 277, Hahn (1977) 75-77, and Wildberger (2006b) 206-208.

god and the ordered development of all particular things.”¹⁷³ If later Stoics wanted to move away from eliminating Forms in favor of the non-existent concepts of Zeno and Cleanthes or the incorporeal *lekta* of Chrysippus,¹⁷⁴ the thinking goes, they could adapt the Forms as the existent patterns of whatever has, does, and will exist that constitute the seminal principles. As Reydam-Schils notes in particular reference to Seneca, these Stoic “Forms” would differ from the transcendent Platonic Forms in their “embeddedness” in corporeal reality, since the seminal principles are not distinct from the cosmos and its history (as a mixture of matter and god) except in abstraction, but they would still resemble Forms as the “very structure of reality.”¹⁷⁵

There is, it seems to me, one primary problem with this interpretation. As Julia Wildberger rightly points out, these “principles” are not just patterns that bodies instantiate, but rather they are bodies themselves, for they have causal power.¹⁷⁶ They are corporeal parts of the cosmos that, as “seeds,” contain within them and bring about the progression of qualities of the object that contains them.¹⁷⁷ In constituting and directing the development and dictating the qualities of *unique* particulars, these seminal principles don’t seem to have the generality and multi-instantiation that is essential for anything meant to resemble Forms, for they themselves are particular to their object, such as *this* man Socrates or *this* universe.¹⁷⁸ Thus, like specific tensions of different portions of *pneuma*, there will be certain similarities between the seminal principles that shape Socrates and Seneca that qualify them as seminal principles of (a) man, but they will nonetheless be quantitatively and, in some way, qualita-

¹⁷³ Long and Sedley (1987) 277.

¹⁷⁴ On these approaches, see Caston (1999).

¹⁷⁵ Reydam-Schils (2010) 198. Cf. Reydam-Schils (2005, 2006).

¹⁷⁶ Wildberger (2006b) 207.

¹⁷⁷ Cf. *Ep.* 90.29.

¹⁷⁸ Cf. *N.Q.* 3.29.3 with Wildberger (2006b) 208, cf. Bobzien (1998) 33.

tively *distinct* seminal principles.¹⁷⁹ As such, seminal principles maintain the Stoic claim that the general entities identified by Forms do not exist.¹⁸⁰ Just as we derive the general conception of “human” from individual humans while the conception doesn’t, strictly speaking, have an actual referent, so too might we derive an idea about humankind’s nature from grasping the seminal principles of particular people, at the same time as that notion of “human nature” has no actual referent, i.e. some single but multi-instantiated seminal principle of “human.” And it would be this *general* seminal principle that might, at least coherently, be identified with Platonic Forms.

In identifying the *formae* as the *rerum natura*, I agree with Reydam-Schils that Seneca uses Platonism to express his concern “with distinguishing the surface appearance of reality from its *depth* structure, the *pneumatic* tension that orders all reality” (original emphasis), but this does not, it seems to me, require any appeal to seminal principles, especially as Stoic adaptations of the Platonic Forms.¹⁸¹ In an analogous way to *imaginaria* and perceptibles, Seneca’s *formae* are similar to Forms in their stability and eternity (of a certain sense), but they are nonetheless fundamentally different, for they are corporeal entities and the cosmic pieces that make up the cosmic whole, ordered and identical with god. There is, then, an insightful critique of Platonic Forms here: Platonists see it as necessary to grasp a stable reality by looking to something outside of the physical cosmos, but for Seneca and the Stoics, a stable reality is right in front of us, so long as we see it in the right light and, as it were, through the

¹⁷⁹ As Hahm (1977) 75 argues, there seems to be a direct correspondence between seminal principles and physical seeds (e.g. of a tree or as semen). But, of course, each seed of an oak tree is not the *same* seed, even though every oak tree seed develops into an oak tree.

¹⁸⁰ In fact, Zeno appealed to god as the all-encompassing seminal principle explicitly to deny the existence of Forms (Calcidius 294).

¹⁸¹ Reydam-Schils (2010) 209. That said, seminal principles, seemingly recognized by Seneca, could be a fruitful addition to this discussion: cf. *Ben.* 3.29.4, “seeds [*semina*] are the causes [*causae*] of all things” and *Ep.* 90.29, “the force of every seed that shapes each particular thing as it should be [*singula proprie figurantem*].” The serious questions about what precisely seminal principles are, raised in part by the dearth of sources concerning them, makes such an addition particularly fraught and difficult.

right lens of a wise worldview, recognizing stability not in everlastingness *per se* but in the rational coherency of a divine cosmos.

To this end, Seneca's exhortation at §27.6-7 ("let us cast our minds...") coopts the Platonic division between soul-reason and body-senses, not as ontologically distinct nor perceptive of different ontological domains, but as standards of judgment and evaluative orientations of the sort evidenced in *Ep.* 71. The Platonized redirection of our minds to god and the *formae* in *Ep.* 58 is explicitly presented as an evaluative reorientation (cf. *contemnamus*; 28.4) that privileges rationality and providential, cosmic coherency over sensory titillation and attachment that gives rise to the illusory *imaginaria*.¹⁸² In the final part of *Ep.* 58 at §29-36, the lesson Seneca draws from our turn from the "world" of *imaginaria* to the reality of god and *formae* expands on the soul-body distinction in the Platonic scene of §26.6-28 in a familiar way. Should we come to understand the cosmology of §27.6-28, Seneca recommends, we should also recognize that we humans are microcosmic parallels (§29). Just as a providential god maintains the cosmos, so too can our own rational foresight (*providentia*; 29.3) protect our bodies and prolong our mortal lives.¹⁸³ In this literal embodiment of the divine and rightly-reasoned worldview, in which a proper concern is shown for the body (cf. the *cura regentis* shown towards the *vitium corporis* [i.e. the material cosmos]; 27.8-28.3), Seneca lays the groundwork for the possibility and propriety of "measur[ing] man by the standard of a god" (*Ep.* 71.6.3-4).

Mirroring the fundamental identity of evaluative orientation and conceptualization in *Ep.* 71, the lesson of §29-36 equally marks the reorientation denoted by "casting our mind..."

¹⁸² Cf. Inwood (2007b) 132 and Sedley (2005) 134 ("... and the best [Seneca] can do in this case is urge us to reflect on Plato's eternal Ideas as a device for turning our mind from the fleeting aspects of our own existence to the ever-lasting benevolence manifested in the world's government.").

¹⁸³ Seneca is more explicit elsewhere (*Ep.* 65.24: *quem in hoc mundo locum deus obtinet, hunc in homine animus; quod est illic materia, id in nobis corpus est*; also *NQ* 2.45.1) about the Stoic fact that divine *pneuma* is the soul of the cosmos and pervades it as its body just as our own soul pervades our own bodies.

(§27.6-7) as a process of conceptual integration concerning matters – in particular, mortality – previously paradoxical. In coming to view both pleasure (29.4-5) and old age (32.2-3) as neither good nor bad, but only their proper or improper use, we resolve two contradicting intuitions about aging: that it is regrettable and distasteful (cf. *fastidire*, 32.5) due to its physical decrepitude (cf. 34.6-9), but also desirable as “something most clear and pure” (33.2-3), so long as our minds still work. Seneca effects this resolution through two semantic paradoxes. We must determine, Seneca writes, whether old age is the mere “dregs” (*faex*) or its “clearest and purest” part (33.2) since “it is of the greatest import whether someone extends their life [*vitam*] or their death [*mortem*]” (33.5). Seneca leaves the resolution of this semantic paradox implicit, but it turns on seeing productive and mentally active old age as a continuation of living (*vita*), in the ethically-charged sense common in Seneca, not just different from, but even diametrically opposite to an old age that brings with it mere continued existence, which counts only as a lengthening of the process of dying (*mortem*; cf. *praemortuum corpus*, 33.4).¹⁸⁴ A little later, Seneca tells Lucilius that if old age begins to weaken his mind and will leave him not a life (*vitam*) but mere living (*animam*, 35.5), he will give it up. Again, this semantic paradox, which activates our conflation of *vita* and *anima*, distinguishes an old age that counts as life and that of only continued existence, but here a pun accentuates the underlying soul-body evaluative axis. Only the continued good function of the rational soul constitutes the desirable *vita* in old age, whereas sheer bodily vitality granted by being ensouled – *anima* without *animus* – means little in isolation. Our resolution of these paradoxes fosters the development of the worldview promoted in the Platonic scene of §26.6-28 and

¹⁸⁴ For this normative distinction between life and death, see also, e.g., *Brev.* 20.5, *Brev.* 2.2, and *Ep.* 122.2 with Edwards (2014).

inspires, even if only as we read *Ep.* 58, a movement away from the incongruous *imaginarium* of old age to a view of it in its true nature.

Lastly, the language of the encouraged reorientation of §27.6-7 focuses our attention directly on the affective dimension (a life of smooth flow versus jarring paradox) encapsulated in the Platonic two-world imagery of §26-28 and thus deemphasizes its non-Stoic metaphysics. While Seneca's recommendation that we "marvel" (*mireremur*, 27.6) at god and the *formae* may strike the casual reader as both fitting, in so far as *mirari* can connote a marveling born of a high evaluation of an object,¹⁸⁵ and hence expected, it should not sit so easily for a close reader of the *Letters*. Seneca's use of *mirari* often, if not standardly, denotes a foolish reaction: one of awe or puzzlement at something wrongly seen as paradoxical or of an unduly high value, especially on the basis of exceptionality.¹⁸⁶ Indeed, in the letters leading up to *Ep.* 58, Seneca singles the sage out as she who is above such a reaction: though the sage avoids and goes after (*eligit*) certain things, she neither fears nor marvels at (*miratur*) them (*Ep.* 31.6.2-3), and she scorns what is admired (*mirabilia calcantem*, *Ep.* 45.9.4).¹⁸⁷ With this as the predominant sense of *mirari* in the *Letters*, that we *should* marvel at god and the *formae* at first seems odd. But this surprise marks an important reversal, for here Seneca does recommend an attitude of awe, but directed at stability, consistency, and unity, rather than change, novelty, and particularity.

Such an attitude appears earlier in more circumscribed contexts, such as in *Ep.* 33, where Seneca admonishes Lucilius for admiring philosophical *sententiae*, when this sentiment stems mostly from an unevenness that makes these sayings stick out (cf. *notabilia* and *inexpect-*

¹⁸⁵ On this connotation of *mirari*, see Chapter One Section II.

¹⁸⁶ Thus, e.g., *Ep.* 5.4.4 (*videamus ne ista per quae admirationem parare volumus ridicula et odiosa sint*), *Ep.* 28.1.1 (*admiraris quasi rem novam*), and *Ep.* 31.4.4 (*admirabor et clamabo*).

¹⁸⁷ See also *Ep.* 38.3.

tatae, 1.4 and 2.4). Like the limbs of a beautiful body, a given position of a philosophy becomes truly laudable only in its ordered relationship to its admirable whole (5.2-3).¹⁸⁸ However, in *Ep.* 58 this attitude becomes global and indicates a wholly different way of viewing the world itself and every part of it. Seneca's use of *mirari* here perfectly captures the inverse relationship between the experience of the sage and the fool. On account of his ignorant worldview, the fool marvels at too many things and fails to consistently recognize the ordering reason that pervades the cosmos. He thus experiences a world of paradox in which he reacts in awe – both positive and negative – at unexpected and contradictory affairs. The sage too marvels, but at the cosmos and its parts as expressions of a unifying rational force.¹⁸⁹ The foremost object of virtuous awe in the Platonized scene of *Ep.* 58 is god as the creative and rational power of providence.¹⁹⁰ And while the fool can and often does admire (albeit inconsistently) what is truly good, she does so as often on account of its extraordinariness as for its rationality. So, for example, even as Seneca declares in *Ep.* 120 that we admire the Roman hero Fabricius for his consistency (cf. *tenacem*; 6.7), our awe equally reflects his singularity, for he is “atypical” (*ingens*; 6.5) and has done, as Seneca exclaims as an aside, “what is most difficult” (6.7).¹⁹¹

The sage's own admiration for virtue stems, on the other hand, only from its coherent rationality as “a will [*voluntas*], harmless and beneficial, attentive to reason and never deviating from it, at once venerable and marvelous [*amabilis simul mirabilisque*].”¹⁹² Even as both

¹⁸⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 89.1.

¹⁸⁹ See, e.g., *N.Q.* 6.2, *Ep.* 113.16, and *Ep.* 94.56.

¹⁹⁰ Cf. *N.Q.* 5.18.1: “among the other works of providence, this [viz. the beneficence of winds] also may be looked upon with awe [*admiratione*].”

¹⁹¹ Cf. *Ep.* 9.19, where Seneca writes, “we marvel at certain animals that move through the middle of fires without harm to the body: how much more marvelous [*mirabilior*] is this man [viz. the sage] who, through iron, ruin, and fire, comes out without wound and unharmed!”

¹⁹² *Ep.* 92.3.5-7. Cf. also *Ep.* 74.20 and *Ep.* 66.29.

the sage and the fool live in a remarkable world, their experience of it as such is markedly different. The clear-eyed sage experiences reality as it is in its awesome regularity and rationality, and in accordance with this she herself acts and reacts, as a self-aware player alongside god, in perfect harmony with this providential production. The fool, however, sees a world at odds. The distortion effected by his ignorant worldview mixes any glimpses he might get of natural coherency with marvelous entities and events that interrupt the expected yet incomplete order. This world, remarkable in its discordancy, may offer great pleasure as well as pain, but the uncertain and capricious mind that both creates and is created by it cannot but suffer amidst it.

IV: Conclusion

It is this difference of experience and the resulting affect that runs through Seneca's appropriation of Platonic imagery, language, and framing. If what I have argued persuades, Seneca's engagement with Platonism in the *Letters* and elsewhere reflects a sophisticated and original Stoic retooling that cannot be neatly accounted for as either substantive philosophical eclecticism or familiar protreptic rhetoric, nor even as an adaptation whose philosophical content can be traced in full to earlier Stoic thinking. Seneca reformulates what is fundamentally an ontological division within Platonism between the paradoxical perceptible world of *doxa* and the real and eternal intelligible world of *epistēmē* into a fundamentally psychological and epistemic division between the "worlds" experienced through the ignorant *doxai* of the fool's worldview and the *epistēmē* of the sage's. This Platonized manner of thinking and the motifs, language, and stylistic measures through which Seneca presents it give pride of place to the nature of and relationship between the incoherency of ignorance and the fool's unsettling experience of paradox, on the one hand, and consistent knowledge and the tranquil life

of the sage on the other. Seneca depicts the illusory, fractured “world” experienced by the fool, which in many ways exists only in our own minds, as concrete, but in such a way and with such language to reinforce for the reader that the paradoxicality of this “world” is fundamentally a cognitive construct and not a metaphysical fact.¹⁹³

¹⁹³ It should be reiterated, then, that Seneca’s innovation is psychological and epistemological rather than metaphysical. In presenting the fool’s “world” as a product of our unsteady and ignorant minds and as the Platonic cave or Vergilian hell, Seneca does not introduce some truly distinct metaphysical domain. We fools do not live somewhere other than in the actual, physical world. We interact with reality. We are not the counterparts to Plato’s sages, who in a very real sense go elsewhere as they contemplate the Forms. Unlike the Platonic perceptible world that does exist in a place, as it were, distinct from the intelligible world, the paradoxical world of our experience, populated by *imaginarium*, exists nowhere other than in our own minds, as non-existent figments that already fit (albeit uneasily) within Stoic ontology. In other words, even as we interact with the real world, the world we take ourselves to inhabit in many ways does not reflect reality. But on the other hand, insofar as our worldviews aren’t totally off in much of what they contain, our experience does often in other respects match reality. And in this, in fact, there lays the possibility of resolving the contradictions within our worldviews such that we come to be wise.

Paradox and Self-Ignorance in the *Letters*

I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice;
for it is myself that I portray. My defects will here be read to the life, and also my natural
form, as far as respect for the public has allowed.
- *Essays*, “To the Reader,” Michel de Montaigne¹

I: Introduction

While the previous chapter considered Seneca’s depiction of the fool’s paradoxical experience and his original cognitive theory that lies behind it, this chapter will consider Seneca’s account of and approach to *self*-ignorance and the role paradox plays in it as well. In turning our attention to self-ignorance, we move to what is, for Seneca, the first and most essential step in remedying our ignorance and improving our imperfect condition, for philosophical study and practice cannot take place, at least to any salutary effect, without the recognition *that* we are ignorant, vicious, and in need of philosophy.² Of particular significance, we will discover in this chapter that the self-ignorance of chief interest for Seneca is specifically of the distressing “paradoxicalizing” effect of our ignorant worldviews on our experience detailed so far. Moreover, this state of self-ignorance, i.e. our obliviousness to our ignorance’s singular causal role in our suffering and the paradoxicality that intensifies and partly constitutes it, actively resists recognition by the mind in it. To counter this, I will propose that Seneca takes a unique approach to using paradoxicality in the *Letters* to begin fostering the reader’s self-awareness of the dynamics of their ignorance, and in so doing, works to make the more abstract theorization that we have seen lies behind understanding *Ep.* 58 a personally reformatory reflection.

¹ Trans. D.M. Frame (2003). On parallels between Seneca’s and Montaigne’s work, cf. Cancik (1967) 91-101.

² Interestingly, in *Ep.* 108.4, Seneca contends that philosophical speech *can* have a salutary effect on an unengaged (albeit unresisting [*non repugnantibus*; 9]) listener, but the point here is that the salutary effect is in essence incidental to their misguided “philosophical” activities.

Whereas I have previously not limited myself to material from the *Letters*, this chapter will now turn to it in particular. This focus is motivated, on the one hand, by the fact that the vast majority of Seneca's considerations (versus mere mentions) of self-ignorance occur in the *Letters*.³ On the other hand, and more significantly, the inherently personal nature of the *Letters* makes them an ideal vehicle for exploring, exhorting, and modeling the inward-directed examination that necessarily precedes and accompanies self-awareness (my term for a state of mind that consciously recognizes the individual's true condition, whether or not it is to the degree or in the way that would constitute Stoic knowledge properly speaking).⁴ For present purposes, two observations are of particular relevance. First, breaking from the epistolary tradition of Cicero, as Marcus Wilson puts it, "Seneca's epistles reflect not the outside world so much as the condition and workings of his own mind,"⁵ a sense that Seneca creates and manipulates, we will see, to great effect. In this, the *Letters* accord especially well with the ancient theorists' claim that an epistle acts "as an image of [the letter writer's] soul" (εἰκόνα... τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς; pseudo-Demetrios §227).⁶ But more than a *static* image, the discursive and serial nature of Seneca's letters render in them "a sense of the mind thinking rather than having thought,"⁷ where, in respect to self-awareness, we see the process as much as the product.

³ Notable exceptions occur at *Tranq.* 6 and *Ira* 2.36. This point is limited to Seneca's prose works, for, of course, we may reasonably take the *Oedipus Rex*, *Hercules Forens*, and *Medea*, for example, as poetic explorations of self-ignorance.

⁴ See, in particular, *Ep.* 38 and *Ep.* 40. Cf. Davies (2014) 83-88, Schafer (2011), Wilson (2008), and Graver (1996).

⁵ Wilson (2008) 61.

⁶ Cf. *Ep.* 40.1. See Ker (2002) 30 and Mazzoli (1991) concerning Seneca and Cugusi (1983) on epistolography in general.

⁷ Wilson (2008) 69. See *Ep.* 118 for Seneca's self-conscious break from Ciceronian-style epistolography.

Second, Seneca's treatment of paradox – so often a concern only of dialecticians – as an essentially ethical dilemma⁸ grows in part out of Seneca's censure of, as he sees it, the tendency to engage in and with paradox to little benefit as it is found in dialectical sophisms and arguments, philosophical “quibbling over words” (*verborum cavillatio*) and “sophistical debates that uselessly exercise acumen” (*captiosae disputationes quae acumen inritum exercent*; *Ep.* 45.1-3).⁹ These logical puzzles and subtle argumentations, though vital for final disambiguation and for advanced *proficientes* to fully stabilize their progress,¹⁰ do not lead those still in the thick of vice into the open-minded investigation and self-reflection necessary for the upheaval of their misguided commitments.¹¹ On such a view, the epistolary form and generic restraints that shape the *Letters* indeed benefit rather than hinder Seneca's project.¹² As Brad Inwood suggests, Seneca's uniquely prevalent rejections of formal dialectic in the *Letters* rela-

⁸ In a way that extends beyond the fact that the interdependent and self-reinforcing integrity of the whole Stoic system of ethics, physics, and logic makes any clear delineation between these fields and any ranking of their salutary effects theoretically impossible. On the systematicity of the Stoic system, see Ierodiakonou (1993). Cf. *Ep.* 89, where Seneca tells Lucilius that he can (and should) read about any of the three “parts” of philosophy “so long as [he] imports whatever he reads into his character [*mores*]” (18.1-2).

⁹ Cf. “We tie up knots and interweave ambiguous meanings [*amiguam significationem*] into our words and then we undo them” (*Ep.* 45.5.2-4); and “Why do you distinguish for me homonyms [*vocum similitudines*] that no one is every misled by except while they engage in philosophical back-and-forth [*disputat*]?” (*Ep.* 45.6.1-2; cf. *disputare cum Socrate licet*; *Brev.* 14.2). See also Cicero, *N.D.* 2.20 and *Fin.* 3.26 with Inwood (1990). On the dialectical nature of the syllogisms that Seneca objects to, see Schofield (1983) 50-53 and Long and Sedley (1987) 218 with Castagnoli (2010) and cf. Seneca's use of the term *interrogationes* to identify syllogism in *Ep.* 85.1, his interchangeable use of *interrogatio* and *sophisma* concerning a syllogism at *Ep.* 85.38, and his definition of dialectic (διαλεκτική) as “speech split between responding and answering” (*oratio... inter respondentem et interrogantem discissa*; *Ep.* 89.17.2-3).

¹⁰ Cf. *Ep.* 109.17-18 with *Ep.* 89.1 and 17 and *Ep.* 117.18.

¹¹ See, e.g., *Ep.* 82.19 and 23 and *Ep.* 87.40-41 with, esp., Wagoner (2014), who summarizes and engages with prior scholars (in particular, Cooper (2004), Inwood (2007b) esp. 218-219, and Barnes (1997b)) on the vexed question of Seneca's view on the philosophical value of dialectic. He also nicely draws out that Seneca's position seems to be a less explicit version of Epictetus', who, as scholars have recognized (see, e.g., Cooper (2007b) and Barnes (1997b)), recognizes the necessity of a mastery of dialectic for wisdom but who, nonetheless, warns about its dangers for all but advanced students who have already brought their emotions under greater control. See also Wildberger (2006b) 143-149.

¹² On the style and genre of epistles in Seneca, see, e.g., Williams (2015b), Wilson (2001) and (2008), Inwood (2007a), and Henderson (2004) and (2006). The relatively new emphasis on the *Letters* as a work with a particular “epistoliterarity” (Henderson (2004) 4) and as “serial epistolography” (Wilson (2001) 185) marks a rejection of the work's older identification as philosophical essays in disguise. For a summary of the latter interpretation and sources, see Wilson (2001) 165.

tive to his other works may well reflect, in part, his adherence to the generic prohibition against *sophismata* and involved proofs in letters,¹³ even if he begins to violate this in the later letters.¹⁴ Moreover, together with this, Seneca's choices both to write philosophical letters with the norm of conventional and conversational language (explicitly noted in *Ep.* 38.1)¹⁵ and to write them in Latin, with its – again explicitly recognized and implicitly accepted – notoriously limited vocabulary (cf. *Ep.* 58.1),¹⁶ make the *Letters* a work uniquely suited to Seneca's approach, explored in this study, that wields paradox to exploit rather than avoid or quickly resolve ambiguity.

With these two broad features of the *Letters* in mind, I will argue that they exhibit a distinctive approach to a problem of self-ignorance. Using subtly crafted and mimetic (i.e. dramatized) scenes of first-person narrative, Seneca's *Letters* model the potential development of self-awareness fostered within and through the deceptive projections of our own shortcomings on to the world around us, whose state as projections our self-ignorance obscures. This is achieved with particular force through the manifestation of paradoxicality in the fool's experience and actions, viz. Seneca's or, most likely, his persona's as presented in the *Letters*.¹⁷ As many have noted, these scenes often serve as embodied illustrations – i.e. *exempla* – of good Stoic practice, but my interest is in their ability to stimulate a certain sort

¹³ On these norms, see pseudo-Demetrius §231 and §233 respectively.

¹⁴ Inwood (2007a) 139.

¹⁵ On this norm, see also pseudo-Demetrius §225, and on its manifestation and manipulation in Seneca, see, esp., Setaioli (2000) 9-96.

¹⁶ On Seneca's use of Latin's limited philosophical lexicon (rather than remedy, as in Cicero's case), cf., esp., Henderson (2004) 150-153 for the *Letters* and Inwood (2005d) 18-22 for the whole corpus and a comparison to Cicero. See also Section III in Chapter Two.

¹⁷ None of these effects require or even assume that the *Letters* give accurate accounts of true events in Seneca's life. Indeed, as we will see, the pointed artistry of these scenes suggests that these scenes are at least highly stylized and manipulated accounts of any real event or, as John Schafer (2011) 34 puts it, "entirely governed by Seneca's authorial control." I am in agreement with most scholars, who hold that the *Letters* are at least in detail if not wholly fictional (see, e.g., the lasting case made by Griffin (1976) 416-419).

of “acknowledgement of [one’s] failing” (*notitia peccati*; *Ep.* 28.9.2), which motivates such practices, through the poignant depiction of another’s developing recognition.¹⁸ We will see this strategy as early as *Ep.* 12, but we will turn much of our focus to the letters of the first half of Book 6 (*Ep.* 53-57).

It is this attention to the power of mimesis paired with paradoxicality to work against self-ignorance that calls the early letters of Book 6, which lead up to *Ep.* 58, to the fore. They offer what John Henderson amusingly calls an “excrescence of narrativity” as the most extended, closely grouped, and detailed series of first-person accounts within the *Letters*.¹⁹ In this regard, I will not suggest that they offer a substantively different use of paradox than we will see in *Ep.* 12, but their placement and concentration itself develop additional significance in this use and its aim, as they mark both a culmination and a turning point in the work as it relates to Senecan paradox and the fool’s self-ignorance. Generally speaking, on the one hand, *Ep.* 58 is the first letter of detailed and lengthy theoretical argumentation increasingly common in the second half of the *Letters*²⁰ that marks the corresponding decline in Seneca’s references to the contingent conditions and events in his and Lucilius’ lives.²¹ On the other hand, *Ep.* 58 thus initiates a shift to letters that involve increasing and more formal dialectical argumentation.²² Despite Seneca’s complaints about dialectic’s (esp. syllogism’s)

¹⁸ See, e.g., Cancik (1967) 147-148, Hachmann (1995) 257-262, and Schafer (2011) 45-46.

¹⁹ Henderson (2006) 145; cf. Henderson (2004) 32-35 and Motto and Clark (1971). On the arguably unique narrative arc of Book Six, see Gunderson (2015) 39-40.

²⁰ See, e.g., Schafer (2014) 282-284 (who usefully points out that Inwood (2007b) understandably starts with *Ep.* 58), Griffin (2007) 93-94, and Dietsche (2014) 266-271 with Wilson (2001) 184-186.

²¹ However, such personal references remain as passing introductions to abstract theorization and are, though more rarely, sometimes quite elaborate. Cf. Henderson (2006) with Henderson (2004) 28-45. For instances of elaborate personal accounts in the later books, see *Ep.* 77, *Ep.* 86, and *Ep.* 87.

²² See, e.g., *Ep.* 65, *Ep.* 66, *Ep.* 71, *Ep.* 82, *Ep.* 85, *Ep.* 87, and *Ep.* 102 with Cancik (1967) 35-39.

protreptic and initial persuasive inefficiency, the later letters engage carefully in it.²³ And for our purposes now, while we need not see any inconsistency in this,²⁴ this broad trend points towards the distinctiveness within the philosophical tradition of Seneca's use of paradox in this indirect, "mimetic" manner.

In questioning the power of formal dialectic to evince a transformative awareness of one's own ignorance, Seneca casts doubt on one of the key effects attributed to the dialectical *elenchus* of Socrates as adapted by the Stoic Epictetus.²⁵ Paradox plays a critical role in the supposed self-revelatory effect of this form of dialectic, and in continuing to favor paradox for this end, Seneca remains firmly in this Socratic-Stoic tradition. But the delayed appearance of more formal dialectic relatively late in the *Letters*, even as the exhortation to self-awareness appears as early as *Ep.* 1,²⁶ suggests that Seneca employs paradox in a unique way to counter the self-ignorance of Lucilius and the readers.²⁷ And the early letters of Book 6 stand as a climactic concentration of this approach before the *Letters* begin to delve directly

²³ See, esp., Cancik (1967) 36-42 and 138-139 and Inwood (2007b) with Leeman (1953) and (1954). Cf. also Schafer (2014) and Wilson (2008) 76-78.

²⁴ Given Seneca's objections that it won't change someone's mind if they aren't already ready to do so (see more on this below), the use of dialectic in the second half of the *Letters* isn't contradictory if we take the *Letters* to represent a progressively advanced philosophical education, such that the assumption is made that the student (whether Lucilius or the reader) at some point has made sufficient progress both in learning and motivation to fruitfully and without risk work with dialectical arguments. For persuasive arguments for this "dramatic" reading of the *Letters*, see Schafer (2011) 37-40 along with, esp., Griffin (2007) 89-95 and Wagoner (2014). Cf. also I. Hadot (1969) 54-55, Nussbaum (1994) 340, Gunderson (2015) 14-16, Wilson (2001) 184-186 and (2008) 71-72, and Maurach (1970) 199-206. Schafer picks Lucilius' retirement, announced in *Ep.* 68, as the point at which he is deemed to have made sufficient progress, and it is suggestive that Seneca begins a group of letters that take up a series of dialectical arguments (*Ep.* 82, 85, and 87) with the commendation that he is no longer worried that Lucilius will sabotage his own philosophical progress (82.1.1-5). This interpretation of the later letters stands in contrast to the position advanced by Leeman (1953) that their more technical nature reflects the influence of Seneca's concurrent writing of the technical treatise, *Moralis Philosophia*.

²⁵ On the relation between *elenchus* and self-awareness for Socrates, see, e.g., the *Apology* and the *Meno*; for Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.11 with discussion below in Section III. For Zenonian syllogism, see Schofield (1983), who compellingly argues that they were meant to "prod someone into philosophical reflection" (53) and "buttonhole and provoke the interested reader or listener" (54), in addition to provide proofs (54-57). That Seneca viewed Stoic syllogism and Socratic *elenchus* as falling within the same mode of discussion, cf. Seneca's description of Socrates' philosophical activity as *disputare* (*Brev.* 14.2, cf. *Prov.* 3.12) with the quotations in n. 9.

²⁶ In Seneca's admonitory claim that "I can report the causes [viz. my vices] of my poverty" (4.5).

²⁷ This is not to suggest that this is the only way Seneca fosters self-awareness in the first half of the *Letters*.

into the intricacies of Stoic theory and dialectic. At the same time, it is no accident then that, as we saw last chapter, the “Platonic” scene of §26-28 in *Ep.* 58 succinctly presents a general picture of the divide in the fool and sage’s experiences due to the distorting effects of ignorance. For, on my account, Seneca’s mimetic strategy is intended to establish a state of mind that not only will recognize the deeper import of §26-28 but also do so in a self-reflective way, after which there is a better chance that the *Letters*’ later dialect will offer more than merely academic exercises in argumentation.

We begin in Section II with a brief description of self-ignorance in Stoic philosophy in general and then turn in particular to an account of what I call “projecting self-ignorance,” which comprises Seneca’s preeminent concern with self-ignorance in the *Letters*. In Section III, we will sketch an initial description of Seneca’s first-person “mimetic” approach against projecting self-ignorance and the motivations behind it, using the methodology of Epictetus as a foil, and then fill out this account in detail by looking at the approach at work in *Ep.* 12. Section IV turns to the first half of Book Six, *Ep.* 53 through 57, to trace Seneca’s “mimetic” strategy across these letters that culminates, as we will see in closing in Section V, in *Ep.* 58’s message against our projecting self-ignorance.

II: The Problems of Self-Ignorance

To understand how Seneca wields paradox and first-person narrative for the sake of self-awareness, we need to first understand the central concerns of self-ignorance for Seneca. What may be considered “self-ignorance” within Stoicism and Senecan thought is a broader notion than the circumscribed sense of failing to recognize consistently one’s own cognitive state, especially in the popular, albeit incomplete, interpretation of Socrates’ rebuke in the

Apology that his fellows do not know what they don't know.²⁸ Stoic self-ignorance extends beyond this (as does Socrates') to holding faulty views about one's own general condition, both as an individual and as a human. The Stoics, Seneca included, speak of self-ignorance in the context of insanity:

[The Stoics] say that every fool is insane, since he is ignorant of himself and of what concerns him, which precisely is madness. And this ignorance is the vice opposite to self-control [*sōphrosunē*], and this ignorance is madness because when in a certain disposition it produces impulses that are unstable and fluttering [i.e. emotions].²⁹

We are told elsewhere that *sōphrosunē* is “the production of well-ordered impulses and the grasp of what [sc. truths] produce them.”³⁰ Just as the insane Hercules fails to know who he is and so kills his children in the belief that he is harming his enemy (and so benefiting himself), so too do we fools act via our emotions in a way that expresses our failure to securely grasp our own condition and what truly benefit it.³¹ Nevertheless, not every element of our lack of *sōphrosunē* counts as self-ignorance. Our misguided evaluative commitments and desires concerning externals are not themselves self-ignorance, but these thoughts arise from mistaken views about ourselves. Thus, in *Ep.* 114 Seneca attributes the madness (*furor*; 26.2) of the excessive desire to eat and stockpile luxurious food and drink to the failure to consider (cf. *nemo...cogitat*; 26.2) one's mortal lifespan and stomach size.³² And while, of course, we

²⁸ Plato's Socrates is concerned with a self-ignorance that is more far-ranging than merely ignorance of one's own cognitive state (on this, see Vogt (2012a) 25-50). Consider, for example, *Philebus* 48c-e, where Socrates lists three ways to not know oneself: thinking oneself (1) richer, (2) more physically endowed, or (3) more virtuous.

²⁹ ἔτι δὲ λέγουσι πάντα φαῦλον μαίνεσθαι, ἄγνοιαν ἔχοντα αὐτοῦ καὶ τῶν καθ' αὐτόν, ὅπερ ἐστὶ μανία. τὴν δ' ἄγνοιαν εἶναι ἐναντίαν κακίαν τῇ σωφροσύνῃ· ταύτην δὲ πρὸς τί πως ἔχουσιν ἀκαταστάτους καὶ πτωιώδεις παρεχομένην τὰς ὁρμὰς μανίαν εἶναι (Stobaeus 2.68.18-23 [=LS 42I part]). Cf., e.g., *Ep.* 82.6. On “fluttering” impulses as emotions, see Stobaeus 2.88-90.6 (=LS 65A) and Plutarch, *Virt. Mor.* 446f-447a (=LS 65G).

³⁰ Stobaeus 2.63.6-24 (=LS 61D part). Plato's *Charmides* also pursues to some length the suggestion that *sōphrosunē* is self-knowledge.

³¹ For this scene of Hercules, see esp. *Her. Fur.* 939-1053.

³² Cf. *Ep.* 85.13 and *Ep.* 99.31 for our insane beliefs that we can control what we cannot and that our lives are long. See also *Ep.* 60.

do know we are mortal, as evidenced in our fear of death, we count as self-ignorant precisely because when it matters for our actions and reactions, we lose sight of these views, even as they may come back to mind later. Self-awareness, in this context, thus arises with a “*regular* recognition [*frequens cogitatio*] of [one’s] brief life and its uncertainty” (27.4-5).³³

Yet Seneca does make ignorance of our own faulty mental condition central to his discussions of self-ignorance. This sort of self-ignorance is a fundamental impediment to the philosophical life, and, conversely, awareness of one’s ignorance is the first step.³⁴ However, as will be a constant throughout Seneca’s considerations of self-ignorance, Seneca warns explicitly against ignorance of one’s faulty *ethical* condition. As Seneca writes in *Ep.* 28:

‘The acknowledgement of wrong-doing is the beginning of wellbeing’ [*Initium est salutis notitia peccati*].³⁵ Epicurus seems to me to have said this well, for anyone who does not know that they do wrong has no wish to be set straight. You must understand [*deprehendas*] yourself before you can improve. Certain people take pride in their vices: do you think that anyone who counts their own evils as virtues gives any thought to remedy? (9.2-10.3)³⁶

It is, of course, a central tenet of Stoicism, as the successor of Socrates’ intellectualism, that ignorance of one’s ethical failings is *ipso facto* ignorance of one’s ignorance. But Seneca’s use of this particular Epicurean formulation underscores a fundamental Senecan preoccupation with the different ways we may engage with philosophy, regardless of a specific school. Seneca fears that we will confuse our pursuit of philosophy out of a desire to learn merely “how to hold forth” (*disputare*) with its pursuit out of a truly transformative desire to learn “how to

³³ Compare also Seneca’s recommendation of self-inspection in *On Tranquility of the Mind* 6.1-2.

³⁴ Plato’s Socrates is the first to explore this in depth. See, esp., the opening of the *Meno*, where Socrates brings the slave boy to a state of confusion (*aporia*) about some mathematical fact the boy had previously thought he knew. Socrates then asks Meno, “do you think that he would have tried to find it [viz. the unknown mathematical fact] out before, or to learn that which he believed himself to know, although he does not, before he fell into *aporia*, recognized that he did not know, and formed a longing to know?” (84c.4-6).

³⁵ On this Epicurean quotation, see Setaioli (1988) 220-221.

³⁶ See also, e.g., *Ep.* 6.1 and *Ep.* 39.6.

live” (*vivere*; *Ep.* 108.23).³⁷ Even within Stoicism’s intellectualist psychology, one can become exceptionally learned in Stoic philosophy without a change in character, if one desires – consciously or not – merely to understand Stoicism but not (at least potentially) to adopt it as one’s worldview. Seneca repeatedly reminds Lucilius throughout the *Letters* that “a large part of improving is wanting to improve” (*magna pars est profectus velle proficere*; *Ep.* 71.36.2).³⁸ This admonition marks not only the general point “that desire for a given result is crucial” and the importance of “the second-order quality of our mental lives,” but also that it is of particular significance that we always keep in mind why we study philosophy and, equally, that this is no small feat.³⁹ An essential task, then, of the *Letters* is to inculcate and maintain this self-awareness and the attendant desire in part, at least, through exhorting the reader to honestly examine herself: Seneca follows his Epicurean diagnosis of self-ignorance in *Ep.* 28 with the demand that “as often as possible, refute [*coargue*] yourself, investigate yourself; play first the part of the accuser, then of the judge, and, only at the end, of the advocate” (*Ep.* 28.10.3-5).⁴⁰

What concerns us most here is that Seneca pays particular attention to a specific element of self-ignorance, which bridges both the specific and general sense of self-ignorance: we are inattentive, to the point of self-deception, to the fact that we alone are the source of our contentment or suffering.⁴¹ As Seneca says, “we ought to realize that we are suffering

³⁷ See also *Ep.* 107.12 (“We learn for school rather than life.” [*non vitae sed scholae discimus*]).

³⁸ See also *Ep.* 34.3 and *Ep.* 52.3. On this notion of “willing” (*velle*), see Inwood (2000).

³⁹ Inwood (2005c) 138 and 139.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ep.* 16.2. See, esp., Setaioli (2000) 111-126 and 141-155 on the role of exhortation (*admonitio*) in the *Letters*, which at *Ep.* 38.1 state that *admonitio* is used “in order that he [the listener/reader] may desire to learn” (*ut velit discere*; 8).

⁴¹ Cf. “Everything depends upon belief [*ex opinione*]. Not only do ambition, decadence [*luxuria*], and avarice observe it [*ad illam respicit*], but we also are distressed [*dolemus*] in accordance with it. One is only as wretched as he deems himself so [*tam miser est quisque quam credidit*]” (*Ep.* 78.13.5-7); and “This is not suffering [*dolor*] itself but merely a mental pang [*morsus*]: you make that into suffering” (*Ep.* 99.14.3-4).

[*laboramus*], not the fault [*vitium*] of our surroundings, but our own fault” (*Tranq.* 2.15.1-2).⁴²

This state of mind is, I will argue, the most pressing for Seneca and the one to which the other facets of self-ignorance that interest Seneca relate, and hence its alleviation is particularly fundamental to philosophical progress. Within and through this facet of our state of ignorance, we project our faults onto the world around us, a psychological feature whose philosophical and artistic treatment by Seneca we saw last chapter. As such, I will call this aspect or instantiation of self-ignorance “projecting self-ignorance” and its operation “self-deceiving projection.”

(A) Flattery and Projecting Self-Ignorance

Even though, according to Seneca, we can never be fully blind to our intellectual and ethical failings on account of “an inborn aversion to what nature condemns” (*infixa nobis eius rei aversatio est quam natura damnavit*, *Ep.* 97.16.2-3), our minds resist attending to these facts, and our worldview inclines us towards self-deception.⁴³ Seneca marks out one such disposition as particularly inhibitory: our foolish minds are primed to accept flattery, whether from others or ourselves.⁴⁴ Our ignorance proves so resilient because while we only work against our vices half-heartedly (*non fortiter*, *Ep.* 59.9.6) if at all,

we are quick to be pleased with ourselves. If we come across someone who calls us good men, who calls us prudent or pious, we recognize ourselves [*adgnosimus*]... We assent [*adsentimus*] to those who affirm that we are the best and most wise, although we know that they often lie about many things. We give into [*indulgemus*] ourselves so much that we wish to be praised for the very opposite of how we act. Man hears that he is “the most merciful” [*mitissimum*] in the process of punishment, “most generous”

⁴² Trans. Ker et al. (2014). See also *Ep.* 42.10, *Ep.* 96.1, *Ep.* 98.2-8, and *Ep.* 123.1-2.

⁴³ It is worth noting that in *Ep.* 94.28, Seneca lists the Delphic oracle “Know yourself” (*te nosce*) as one of the precepts that needs no proof to be grasped as true and “are beneficial because [our] nature exercises her own force. Minds carry seeds of every honorable thing, seeds which are excited by admonition not unlike how a spark develops [*explicat*] into a fire by the aid of a fanned flame.” See also *Ep.* 108.8.

⁴⁴ Cf. esp. *N.Q.* 4a.praef on flattery.

in the midst of thievery, and “most self-controlled” in his bouts of drinking and debauchery. Thus it happens that we have no desire to change ourselves [*mutari*] since we believe [*credidimus*] that we are the best. (§11)

We too easily trust those whom we know as liars as long as they say what pleases us, but we “do not sufficiently [*satis*] believe what has been revealed by the wise nor drink it in [*haurimus*] with open hearts [*apertis pectoribus*]” (9.7-9). And this is one of the ways that some come to exult in their vices and see them as virtues.⁴⁵ We resist accepting our own viciousness and ignorance. We have a certain, overly rosy image of ourselves (as, on the whole, good people whose worldviews are sound) in our minds, which motivates what we willingly accept about ourselves, shaping our thinking towards its protection.⁴⁶ For the Stoic Seneca, this motivation is twofold. On the one hand, we are drawn in by the persuasive power of these self-deceiving thoughts, for we recognize (*adgnosere*) ourselves so conceived. On the other hand, these thoughts have a positive affective coloring (and their opposite a negative one), both as a result of their consistency with core beliefs about our identity, which makes them persuasive,⁴⁷ and also as a result of their valence – that we are good is a pleasing thought. We quite literally indulge (*indulgere*) ourselves in this hasty, unreflective motivated reasoning. Still, while we refuse to accept fully the claims of the wise, since they contradict our evaluative views about ourselves, our motivated reasoning forces us into patently paradoxical views – e.g. that this flattering, pathological liar is telling me the truth (11.5-7) – even as it hides our own vicious and ignorant incoherency from ourselves, causing us to think what we want to think in

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ep.* 45.7. Seneca proposes in *V.B.* 12.3-13.3 the same outcome, albeit effected with greater intention, for those who use Epicureanism to justify their vices.

⁴⁶ Cf. *V.B.* 10.2. For a modern discussion of self-deception as the result of “motivationally biased beliefs,” see Mele (2001). On motivated reasoning in general and its role in the numerous ways the human mind reasons poorly, see, esp., Kahneman (2013) and Haidt (2013).

⁴⁷ Cf. *Ep.* 118.8: “There is a difference between what is true and what seems true [*veri simile*]... And what attracts [us] to itself and entices [us] is what seems good...” See also the affective quality of the “smooth movement” (λεῖον κίνημα) of a persuasive impression (Sextus Empiricus, *M.* 7.242-6 [=LS 39G]) and the “turmoil” (ταράσσεσθαι) that arises from confusion *simpliciter* discussed by Epictetus (e.g. at *Diss.* 1.7.20) with Vogt (2014a).

order to maintain a consistently positive self-image (11.8-10). Thus against our minds' efforts to protect this pleasing image, to "trust [ourselves] too quickly and readily" (*Ep.* 16.2.5-6), and to hide our own paradoxical incoherency from our attention, we must critically investigate ourselves and, to counteract flattery, even offend ourselves (cf. *Ep.* 28.10).⁴⁸

This predisposition to see ourselves as good and to avoid or reject thinking that contradicts this, which forms a fundamental component of our projecting self-ignorance, operates unconsciously and manifests through self-deceiving projection (cf. *quid nos decipimus?* *Ep.* 50.4.1), in which we believe ourselves blameless when we suffer and do wrong. Seneca urges Lucilius

to realize that the faults are yours, which you impute to things [*ut intellegas tua vitia esse quae putas rerum*][.] For we ascribe certain defects to places and times, but these will follow us wherever we go. (*Ep.* 50.1.6-8)

To illustrate this, Seneca offers an analogy that is unique within his corpus:

You know how Harpaste, my wife's clown [*fatuam*], has remained an inherited burden in my household. I myself am quite averse to these freaks [*prodigiis*]; if I ever wish to be amused [*delectari*] by a clown [*fatuo*], I do not need to look far: I laugh at myself. This clown [i.e. Harpaste] suddenly went blind. I am telling you something unbelievable, but true: she did not know that she was blind. She frequently asks her attendant to go [*migret*] elsewhere – she says that the house is too dark [*tenebricosam*]. Let it be clear to you that this state, which we laugh at in her case, applies to us: No one realizes that *they* are greedy or overly attached [*cupidum*]. At least the blind seek out a guide. We wander [*erramus*] without a guide and say, "I am not ambitious, but no one is able to live otherwise in Rome. I am not extravagant, but the city itself requires great expenses. It is not a fault of mine that I am prone to anger or that I have not established [*constitui*] a fixed way of living [*certum genus vitae*]: my youthfulness [*adulescentia*] make these so." (§2-3)

The issue is more than, as Erwin Hackmann presents it, that we make our circumstances responsible for our vices.⁴⁹ This would suggest that we rationalize in full awareness of our-

⁴⁸ See Vogt (2012a) 25-50 for a compelling argument of the central role an inflated self-image plays in Socrates' diagnosis of blameworthy ignorance.

⁴⁹ Hackmann (1995) 255: *Die meisten Menschen handeln ähnlich* [i.e. like Harpaste], *wenn sie für ihre Habsucht, ihren Ehrgeiz und ihren Jähzorn ihre Mitmenschen verantwortlich machen.*

selves as vicious, but the lack of this awareness is precisely the point (cf. *nemo... intellegit*). Rather, we do not recognize that we think and act as we do because of our current faulty commitments (i.e. our vicious state of mind). Like Harpaste, we know that there is something wrong in our way of life but think the cause is something external (cf. §4). We are oblivious to our (for the Stoics) unassailable agency. And this is not a case of willful, conscious shirking. As Seneca goes on to say, “we do not know that *we* are sick” (*nos aegrotare nescimus*; 4.3), in an earlier parallel to the fools of *Ep.* 71.23-24, whose “clouded” (*caligat*) minds blame their own weakness on what is happening to them and thus engage in self-deceiving projection (cf. *videbitur illarum vitium esse quod nostrum est*; 24.2).⁵⁰ Our pride and our other misplaced views, which make us ashamed (*erubescimus*; *Ep.* 50.5.2) to improve ourselves, predispose and motivate us to reject thinking that locates our ignorant selves as the cause of our own suffering, since this flies in the face of our commitments about the integrity of ourselves and our worldviews and the extent of the power we ourselves have to shape the quality of our lives.

In addition to making explicit the self-deceiving projection through which our mind hides our projecting self-ignorance from our attention, *Ep.* 50’s account of Harpaste and the “blind” fools also makes clear that our susceptibility to flattery detailed in *Ep.* 59 is itself a form of self-deceiving projection. Seneca concludes this critique in §10-11 with an *exemplum* of Alexander the Great. Here, unable to continue fighting due to a festering arrow wound (12.1-7), Alexander rebukes his followers: “Everyone swears [*iurant*] that I am the son of Zeus, but this wound declares [*clamat*] that I am human [*hominem*]” (12.7-8). “Let us do the same,” Seneca urges:

In proportion to their station in life [*pro sua...portione*], flattery makes each person a clown [*infatuat*]. Let us say: “You all say that I am prudent, but I see [*video*] how many

⁵⁰ See Chapter Three. Seneca unites these two cases in *Tranq.* 2.13-15, in which he writes “Thus we ought to know that the *vitium* by which we are burdened is not the place’s, but ours: we are too weak [*infirmi*] to tolerate anything, enduring neither work nor pleasure nor ourselves nor anything for long” (15.1-4).

counter-productive things [*inutilia*] I covet, how many things that will only harm me I wish for.” (13.1-4)

Beyond the clear allusion to the *fatua* Harpaste of *Ep.* 50 with the unique *infatuare*,⁵¹ “our” rebuttal to flattery consists precisely in our recognition that in the paradoxical pursuit of the sources of our suffering, we are the makers of our own misfortune. Indeed the example of Alexander offers a similar parallel. His physical wound forces him off the field only because it begins to cause excruciating pain (*vulneris dolor cresceret*; 12.5) and debilitation (*crus...obtorpuisset*; 12.6), but it does so as a direct result of Alexander’s stubborn unwillingness to give up his siege (cf. *incepta agere perseveravit*; 12.5). Presumably we are to imagine that his perseverance is born of his boundless desire for conquest and glory – for he is wounded while wandering (*vagaretur*; 12.1) in India, laying waste to people “not even well known to their neighbors” (12.1-2) – and his belief in the protection of his divinity.

(B) Projecting self-ignorance in *Ep.* 53

Projecting self-ignorance plays a critical yet less obvious role in the central account of self-ignorance in the opening letter of Book 6, *Ep.* 53.⁵² While we see further exploration of the unconscious operation of self-deceiving projection, Seneca’s complex likening of self-ignorance to physical illness and dreaming moves the *Letters’* notions of (self-)ignorance and (self-)knowledge out of the absolute dichotomy between ignorance and knowledge most common in Stoic theorizing and into a spectrum along which individuals may move from total ethical self-ignorance to perfect knowledge. On this picture, projecting self-ignorance remains a self-deceiving force even as one grows in self-understanding.

⁵¹ *Fatuus* and its cognate *infatuare* appear across Seneca’s corpus only in *Ep.* 50 and 59 respectively.

⁵² On *Ep.* 53 as a whole, see Motto and Clark (1971), Kölle (1975), and Berno (2006) 29-112.

Ep. 53 opens with a recounting of a recent maritime misadventure, where unexpected rough waters and the resulting seasickness drive Seneca to leap indecorously from the moving ship and swim to shore. This mishap, to which we will return later, inspired Seneca to realize

how great an obliviousness [*oblivio*] to our defects [*vitiorum*] occurs for us, even of our bodily defects, which repeatedly bring their presence to mind [*admonent*], much more for those defects which escape our attention [*latent*] the more serious [*maiora*] they are (5.3-5).

Seneca juxtaposes the proportional relationship between the severity and our acknowledgment of physical maladies to the inverse relationship for our vices (i.e. psychic “maladies” [*morbi*]).⁵³ In §6, fever (*febris*) and gout – or, perhaps, arthritis (*podagra*)⁵⁴ – demonstrate for Seneca that the minor and unspecific manifestations (*motiuncula* and *puntiunculas*; 6.2 and 6.4) of an ailment’s early stages may “deceive” (*decipit*; 6.2) an ill person about its identity. But once the illness is in full swing, the sick person, even if she is “strong and resilient” (*duro et perpessicio*; 6.3), is forced to acknowledge that she is sick. The opposite is true of our vices:

It happens contrarily [*contra evenit*] [sc. to physical illness] in the case of those maladies [*morbis*] by which minds are affected: the worse its state, the less it notices [*sentiit*]. This is not something you should find paradoxical [*miseris*], dearest Lucilius, for someone who sleeps lightly [*leviter*] has impressions [*species*] in accordance with this state of rest [*secundum quietem*], and sometimes, as he sleeps, he recognizes [*cogitat*] that he is asleep. Deep sleep [*gravis sopor*] extinguishes even dreams and sinks [*mergit*] the mind too deep for it to have any grasp of its condition [*altius... quam ut in ullo intellectu sui sit*].⁵⁵ Why does no one admit [*confitetur*] their vices? Since even now they are in them: to recount one’s dream is a mark of being awake [*vigilantis*], and to admit [*confiteri*] one’s own vices is a sign of health [*sanitatis*]. Let us thus wake up [*expergiscamur*], in order that we may be able to expose our errors [*ut errores nostros coarguere possimus*]. (7.1-8.4)

⁵³ On this passage, see Kölle (1975) 34-45 and 53-69. On vice as *morbi*, see, esp., *Ep.* 75.10-12. On the medical analogy in Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman philosophy, see Nussbaum (1994).

⁵⁴ On whether *podagra* here refers to gout or arthritis, see Berno (2006) 76-79.

⁵⁵ For the translation *intellectu sui* as “grasp of its condition,” compare another such use of *intellectus* at *Ep.* 120.13, where we are told that the sage shines out and “produces in others a grasp of himself” (*fecit multis intellectum sui*; 13.3). Within the context of this letter on how we come to have the correct notion of goodness and virtue, this *intellectum sui* clearly means our understanding of the sage as one who is wise and virtuous.

Previous work on these passages identifies the issue at hand as one of an individual's willful refusal to accept their condition and thus intentionally deceive. But these interpretations fail to account for these analogies as support for our increased *obliviousness* (*oblivio*) concerning more severe vices. Seneca's language of torture and confession, which linguistically link the two analogies (cf. *confessionem exprimit*; 6.3 and *podagram fateri*; 6.8 with *confitetur* at 8.1 and *confiteri* 8.3), does *seem* to suggest intentionality.⁵⁶ Thus Martin Kölle argues that “one looks for excuses” at the early stages of sickness, until the severity of the ailment compels us, like a torturer, to admit its identity and presence.⁵⁷ For him, the dynamics of physical illness and vice fundamentally differ in their relation to “willpower” (*willensanstrengung*), since severe physical illness compels our acceptance of its presence, while our “confession” of serious vice is a voluntary act that resists the deceiving force of vice.⁵⁸ But this makes an argument for obliviousness – i.e. the failure for something to, as it were, consciously register – hinge on our reactions to what, it seems, we are well aware of but simply refuse to openly admit. It is true that Seneca tells us to “wake up” (*expergiscamur*; 8.3), which Kölle takes to exhort a voluntary “confession” of our viciousness.⁵⁹ But we cannot command ourselves out of sleep.⁶⁰ Instead, we must use tools like alarms or habituation and the planning to arrange such tools or habituation to effect it. Likewise, Seneca envisages epistemic “waking up” as the progressive result of insightful views gained through the practice of philosophy, which

⁵⁶ On the tight structural correspondence between the §5-6 and §7-8, see Kölle (1975) 55-62.

⁵⁷ Kölle (1975) 42, cf. 69.

⁵⁸ Kölle (1975) 56-57 and 69.

⁵⁹ Kölle (1975) 69.

⁶⁰ That is, we cannot wake up by simply deciding to wake up. Yes, something in our dream (and hence something that originates in us) may jolt us awake, as in the case, e.g., of nightmares or dreams of falling. And we may learn to become lucid enough in our dreams to create such a jolt or to recognize features of our experience that reveal our dream state and in this awareness trigger our waking (see, e.g., Kahan and S. (1994)). But even this latter means of waking up, while potentially voluntary, is not simply a decision or the willing to awake.

alone can “stir us” (*nos... excitabit*) and “shake [*excutiet*] us out of deep sleep” (*Ep.* 53.8.4-6), rather than some singular and exceptional mental event that inexplicably deviates from the thinking that accords with our states of mind. The problem isn’t that we just need to suck it up, so to speak, and face our viciousness, but rather that we need to come to recognize how our own viciousness deceives us, and to form the commitments needed to see fully through this deception (thus dispelling it).

While less definitive than Kölle, Francesca Berno also speaks of the sick person’s “refusal to consider” troubling evidence and, like Kölle, of “excuses.”⁶¹ She points specifically to Seneca’s remark that as gout gets worse “we *dissimulamus* and say either that we twisted our ankle or overworked it [*laborasse*] in some bout of exercise” (6.4-6). *Dissimulamus* seems to suggest conscious deception, but, again, this would make little sense as an example of obliviousness. Instead, consider Serenus’ apropos statement in *On Tranquility of the Mind*:

We look at our own affairs [*domestica*] with a kind eye [*familiariter*] and partiality [*favor*] is always detrimental to our judgment. I think many would have been able to gain wisdom, if they had not thought that they were already there, if they had not disregarded [*dissimulassent*]⁶² certain things in themselves, [nor] passed over others with closed eyes [*quaedam opertis oculis transiissent*]. Indeed you should not think that we are destroyed more by others’ flattery than our own. Who has dared to tell himself the truth? (1.15.5-16.5)⁶³

We do not *try* to deceive ourselves, but this is nonetheless the result of our compromised faculty of judgment and the biased beliefs that it leads us to hold. Together with Seneca’s talk in *Ep.* 53 of the incipient ailment’s deceptiveness (*decipit*), Seneca focuses the issue on our ability to avoid facing the facts while any plausible deniability remains, however tenuous:

⁶¹ Berno (2006) 71 and 75-76.

⁶² For this meaning of *dissimulo*, see TLL IIa. In fact, this passage is cited as an example of such a use.

⁶³ Cf. in Statius’ *Thebaid* where when the battling Hippomedon goes to move, he is stopped by a spear that has pierced his leg which, in his bloodlust (*ardens*), “he did not consider or know was there” (*dissimulaverat... / sive ibi nescierat*; 9.203-204). See also *Ep.* 94.25: *saepe animus etiam aperta dissimulat* (“often the mind even overlooks what is obvious”).

our dithering (cf. *quaeritur nomen*; 6.6) continues while our condition is *uncertain* and developing (*dubio et incipiente*; 6.6), until we cannot but recognize its unmistakable manifestations.⁶⁴ Seneca makes neither a “lumpishly far-fetched” suggestion that we forget about our serious illnesses nor the more humdrum point that we may intentionally lie about their severity.⁶⁵ Rather, he proposes the plausibility that our foolish mind is capable of deceiving *itself* and rationalizing what may seem self-evident signs to an outside viewer or, in fact, ourselves in a different state of mind.

What then of Seneca’s metaphorical language of torture and confession? As both Kölle and Berno discuss, in reference to physical illness, it underscores the severity of the ailment and its accompanying physical pain, the strong persistence of our resistance to acknowledgement, and the sense of passivity or compulsion in which we finally admit reality.⁶⁶ But we should not overextend this analogy and read the knowing withholding of a person being tortured into the resistant acknowledgment of the sick person. Just as the “blind” men of *Ep.* 50 are honestly unaware of their own viciousness, so too do at least some sick people often continue to convince themselves in good faith that the evidence, which points more and more to a serious problem, instead indicates only a minor, non-threatening issue.⁶⁷ The corresponding act of “confession” concerning our vice in §8 of *Ep.*

⁶⁴ Cf. *Ep.* 82.7: “Some think that they have restrained these things [sc. desires and fears] even with philosophy. But when some event tests these ‘secure’ [*securos*] individuals, a confession is at last forced out. Their great words cease when the torturer demands their hand, when death comes near. Then one can say to them, ‘you used to challenge evil so easily when it was absent. Here now is suffering [*dolor*], which you used to say was able to be endured; behold death, which you spoke against boldly with many words.’” As Berno (2006) 71 and 75-76 discusses, the choice of the words *dubio et incipiente* is deliberate and important, for they directly recall the language through which Seneca describes the storm he is caught in (*dubio et independente caelo*; 1.5) in the opening narrative.

⁶⁵ Motto and Clark (1971) 221. Cf. Kölle (1975) *contra* Motto and Clark (1971).

⁶⁶ Cf. e.g. Berno (2006) 68 on the misplaced “heroic” endurance of Seneca as he swims to shore and the sick man of §6 and Kölle (1975) 56-57, where he suggests that the “confessions” of physical disease vs. mental disease differ precisely by the one being passively forced and the other deliberate, respectively.

⁶⁷ On the role of “evidence” in this passage, cf. Berno (2006).

53 accords with this form of motivated self-ignorance exhibited by both the “blind” people of *Ep.* 50 and the sick people of §6 and, in this, implicates our inclination to project our faults outward in our obliviousness to them. Kölle rightly argues that Seneca seems to appeal to dreaming as a sort of proof (introduced with *nam* at §7.3) for his claim about the inverse relationship between awareness and the state of vice.⁶⁸ But we need not join him, it seems to me, in denying the description’s simultaneous force as an analogy for vice, as suggested by, for example, Seneca’s comparison of recounting one’s dreams to admitting one’s vices at §8.2-3 and his metaphorical exhortation to “wake up” at §8.3.⁶⁹ And, as such, the analogy to dreaming provides insight into the awareness of our vice as a progression – a feature Kölle himself stresses – and as an inverted correlate to illness.⁷⁰

Seneca’s depicts the sequence of dreaming as a spectrum of awareness with deep, dreamless sleep on one end as the ultimate state of *oblivio* (7.4-6) and alert wakefulness on the other (8.2-3). Yet between these lie two stages (cf. *et... et aliquando*; 7.3-4) of light sleep: dreamful sleep and self-aware dreaming, i.e. lucid dreaming.⁷¹ While Seneca’s correlation of light sleep with incipient illness (cf. *levis... motiuncula* and *leviter dormit*) and deep sleep with severe illness illustrates the inverted severity-awareness relation, it also reveals a less obvious and easily overlooked detail: the state in which we “confess” our vices is *not* one of complete “wakefulness.” As we only recognize our illness once it becomes severe enough, we only recognize our viciousness, *mutatis mutandis*, once it has weakened enough. In either case, recognition occurs *within* the recognized state, and thus in the framework of the sleep-vice

⁶⁸ Kölle (1975) 58-59.

⁶⁹ Cf. Kölle (1975) 58.

⁷⁰ Kölle (1975) 66.

⁷¹ Should we want to be particularly specific, we need not take this as the sort of full-bodied lucid dreaming that either rarely occurs or only occurs with training. Rather, I think we should take this as the sort of dreaming common in that semi-lucid stage between sleeping and waking.

analogy, recognition of our viciousness correlates to a certain stage of awareness *within* sleeping. And while Seneca does remark that “to recount one’s dream is a mark of being awake, and to admit one’s own vices is a sign of health” (*somnium narrare vigilantis est, et vitia sua confiteri sanitatis indicium est*; 8.2-3), certainly these are not fully corresponding states. Seneca reasonably analogizes wakefulness to (psychic) health, but while telling of one’s dreams follows only on full wakefulness, admitting one’s viciousness demonstrates a merely relative wellness (cf. *initium est salutis notitia peccati*; *Ep.* 28.9.2), still short of complete healthiness (i.e. virtue).⁷² Much of the confusion here, it seems to me, arises from the fact that Seneca makes explicit both of the extremes in the sleep-wakefulness and vice-virtue spectra, while he leaves out full health in the analogous health-illness spectrum of §6.

Seneca’s analogies suggest, then, that our confession-cum-recognition of our own viciousness corresponds to a state of lucid dreaming, rather than full wakefulness, for it is this state – the lightest stage of sleeping – that inversely correlates with the “heaviest” stage of physical illness and its resulting recognition. This correspondence characterizes (1) our recognition of vice as an awareness of the cause of our viciousness, namely our own ignorance, and (2) the preceding stage as one not of a total lack of awareness of vice, but rather as a misplacement of its source. As we have seen, the “confession” of physical illness amounts to a recognition of the illness *as that illness*. We are not oblivious to the presence of something wrong while the illness develops, but this awareness leaves room for motivated misidentification. But Seneca’s examples of such misidentification are telling: when plagued with the disease of gout, we may blame the pain on “twisting our ankle” (*talum extorsisse*) or “overworking [our ankle] in exercise” (*in exercitacione aliqua laborasse*; 6.4-6). These are one-off

⁷² Indeed this merely relative comparison is reflected in Seneca’s language. As Berno (2006) 84 notes, the parallel of *narrare* with *confiteri* emphasizes the *opposition* between the “objective” act of recounting a dream, which one is no longer engaged in and is recognized for what it was, and the act of admittance, which implies “emotional involvement.”

and external causes of injury, not the result of something enduringly wrong with us. Here, we engage in the physical equivalent of self-deceptive projection. Conversely, our deep sleep – of which we have no awareness – eases into an awareness in the form of experiences within dreams, which, as so interested ancient philosophers,⁷³ we commonly misinterpret as external reality rather than as products of our mind. But the next stage of sleep, lucid dreaming, precisely recognizes dreams *as dreams*, which is to say, the result of the mental state of dreaming: the dreamer “as he sleeps, recognizes [*cogitat*] that he sleeps” (7.4).

Especially with the “blind” men of *Ep.* 50 still fresh in mind (being a mere three letters earlier), the corresponding states of viciousness and ignorance follow. “Deep sleepers” lack any awareness of their viciousness (cf. *nullo intellectu sui*; 7.6). Indeed they may even think their vices virtues.⁷⁴ Mere “dreamers” recognize that their lives are in some way off, so to speak, but, like Harpaste and the “blind” men, they undergo self-deceptive projection and explain it by what is external (*extrinsecus*; *Ep.* 50.4.1) rather than what “rests in their very vitals” (*in visceribus ipsis sedet*; 4.2). Seneca’s complaint in *Ep.* 53 is not that we fail entirely to pursue philosophy, thinking it may help to relieve our suffering, but rather that we fail to grasp that our other pursuits are not only futile in this regard but even counterproductive (cf. *impedimenta*; 9.6), for they are driven and informed precisely by our faulty commitments that they will bring goods and happiness. These pursuits are the *imagines* that we saw in *On Tranquility of the Mind* §12.5, which the *inquieta* rush after, unable to recognize (*coarguit*; 12.5) the

⁷³ For the dream-ignorance analogy, see, e.g., Heraclitus Fr. 1 (“...[people] are oblivious to what they do while awake, just as they forget what they do while asleep”) with Kahn (1979) 99-100; Socrates’ claims in *Apol.* 31a to being a gadfly that awakens the sleeping Athens together with Plato’s later uses of this analogy at, e.g., *Rep.* 476c-d and 534c-d with Burnyeat (1970) and Gallop (1972); and lastly Lucretius, *DRN* 3.1047-1053 (“you who spend a great part of your life asleep / and snore while awake [*vigilans*] and never cease to see dreams [*somnia cernere*] / ... nor can you discover what is wrong with you... / while you wander adrift [*fluitans*] in the unstable [*incerto*] error of your mind”). Cf. the discussion of this tradition in direct connection with the passage in *Ep.* 53 in Kölle (1975) 63-65.

⁷⁴ Cf. *Ep.* 28.10.1-3 and *Ep.* 59.11.

self-made illusoriness of these mere appearances (*species*; 12.4).⁷⁵ In fact, in god’s imagined words to sages in *On Providence*, he likens our delusional experience of these “false goods” (*bona falsa*; 6.3.4, cf. *lusi*; 6.3.6) as “a long and deceptive dream” (*longo fallacique somnio*; 3.5). We must thus, Seneca urges in *Ep.* 53, “wholly [*totum*] dedicate” (8.6) ourselves to philosophy, in the same way that we would put off all our work (*negotia*) if we recognized that we were sick, and “wholeheartedly [*toto animo*] seek first to free ourselves [*liberareris*] from our illness [*morbo*]” (9.1-5). The fact that we are still “occupied” (*occupatus* 9.7) with these other vicious pursuits is, for Seneca, a clear sign that we do not recognize that we suffer and go wrong because *we* are “sick” with something that itself solely causes our dissatisfaction.

Better off than mere dreamers, although still short of the *vigilantes* sages, those who “recognize that they are asleep” acknowledge their vices *as their own* (cf. *vitia sua... confitetur* and *vitia sua confiteri*; 8.1 and 3) – i.e. as the result of an internal, faulty condition – and, moreover, as manifestations of a state of ignorance.⁷⁶ Seneca identifies the result of the process of “waking up” via philosophical study as the ability to refute one’s mistakes (*expergiscamur... ut errores nostros coarguere possimus*; 8.3-4). As Berno rightly notes, this use of *coarguere* directed at our vices identifies these *errores* as faulty views, which conflate the true and the false, for in Seneca’s *Letters* the action of *coarguere* involves separating the truth from what merely seems true (e.g., *falsa sub specie veri latentia coarguere*; *Ep.* 89.11.4).⁷⁷ The more epistemically “awake” we are, the better able we are to recognize the nature and source of our viciousness. We go from recognizing viciousness as such, to recognizing viciousness as

⁷⁵ In Chapter Three Section IV.A.

⁷⁶ In this passage, like many others, Seneca does not distinguish between viciousness as the state of mind or as the thoughts-cum-actions that follow from this state of mind.

⁷⁷ Berno (2006) 85. Cf. *coarguit* in *Tranq.* 12.10 above, and see also *Ep.* 13.18, *Ep.* 28.9, and *Ep.* 45.10. On the legalistic connotations of this language, see Berno (2006) 85 and Kölle (1975) 44-46.

our own ignorance, until we understand our errors so precisely that, in this very event, we free ourselves from them and, fully “waking up,” we become wise and virtuous.⁷⁸

III: Seneca’s “mimetic” strategy against self-ignorance

Through the *Letters*’ attention to and exploration of this projecting self-ignorance and the mental “blinding” that obscures the mind’s true condition from itself, Seneca redirects the famous Socratic paradox that the wise recognizes her own ignorance towards what is, so to speak, a second-order self-ignorance. Projecting self-ignorance presents a unique challenge in its particular persistence beyond the baseline self-awareness of a deficiency in our way of life – both in its viciousness and insufficiency for satisfaction – and one’s ignorance in how to remedy it. For even if we seek out philosophy and its proposed solutions, not only are we still, as of yet, ignorant of the sole role that our faulty worldview plays (as the Stoics hold) in our life’s imperfection, but the nexus of core commitments that constitute this self-ignorance actively forestall philosophy’s ability to reveal it. This thus poses an essential problem for the teacher of Stoicism who hopes to promote real progress in her students, since progress can be made only by altering these commitments.

To address this challenge, Seneca takes a novel approach in and aptly suited for his *Letters* through the vivid first-person narratives in which Seneca recounts some particular experience of his. Such mimetic scenes act as indirect mirrors to bring the reader’s attention

⁷⁸ We may think this contradicts Seneca’s views on the relationship between “precepts” (*praecepta*) and “principles” (*decreta*) as expressed in *Ep.* 94.23.5-9: “Remove the errors [*errores*],’ one says, ‘and precepts are superfluous.’ This is false. Imagine in fact that avarice has been relaxed, luxuriousness has been restrained, rashness has been reined in, and the stimulus [*calcar*] to sloth subdued: even with the vices [*vitiis*] removed, what we must do and in what way still need to be taught.” As Seneca discusses elsewhere (*Ben.* 4.26-27), there are two senses of *vitium*: (1) as the erroneous evaluative beliefs that constitute the vices of, e.g. avarice, luxuriousness, and sloth, viz. “money is good,” “luxury is good,” and “effort is bad,” and (2) as ignorance *simpliciter*, insofar as even if a fool doesn’t hold the general belief that “effort is bad,” which qualifies her as slothful, she may still sometimes, in her ignorance, act in a slothful way. In the passage from *Ep.* 94, Seneca speaks of *vitia* of type (1), whereas in *Ep.* 53, he speaks indiscriminately of both. In *Ep.* 94, Seneca points out that even if we get rid of the *errores* that underlie the specific vices, we will still, in our general ignorance, be liable to act on other *errores*.

“to the matter at hand” (*in rem praesentem*), i.e. his role in his own viciousness, suffering, and the paradoxicality that characterizes it, in such a way that circumvents his projecting self-ignorance’s resistant thinking and facilitates a more clear-minded appraisal of his worldview.⁷⁹ But before we turn to this in detail, the *Discourses* of the later Roman Stoic Epictetus offer an important example of a Stoic approach to combat projecting self-ignorance that falls more obviously within the intellectualist tradition of the Stoics. In this, the *Discourses* provide an illustrative point of comparison through which to situate and understand Seneca’s own methodological choices, informed by doubts about the method used in the *Discourses*, but which similarly uses paradoxicality as an essential tool for (self-)investigation and discovery.

(A) Seneca’s approach in contrast with Epictetus’

In many ways, Epictetus and Seneca are like-minded thinkers, not just as Stoics but also in their aims and emphases concerning exhortation to self-examination and avoidance of elaborate doctrinal exposition.⁸⁰ We can hear Seneca when Epictetus declares in *Disc.* 3.23.34 that philosophy doesn’t deserve its name unless it

show[s] individuals and groups the inconsistency [τὴν μάχην] in which they spin and that they pay attention to everything except what they desire. For while they desire what brings *eudaimonia*, they seek it in the wrong place.

Some of their means to this protreptic end of philosophy are indeed quite similar. Most prominently, both wield potent and at times biting admonition as a tool to “shake up” their

⁷⁹ On the didactic mechanisms of the *Letters* in general, see Graver (1996), Hachmann (1995), Schafer (2009), and Wildberger (2006a), with Wagoner (2014). On the other “technologies” in Senecan philosophy that bring one “to the matter at hand,” see Ker (2009) and (2007).

⁸⁰ Cf. on Epictetus, Long (2002) 92.

complacent listeners.⁸¹ However, one feature of Epictetus' method of philosophical discourse in the *Discourses* that sets it apart from Seneca's is its regular operation via Epictetus' Stoic adaptation of the dialectical *elenchus* of Socrates as it is detailed in Plato's *Gorgias*, through which targeted questions draw out paradoxical thinking and so clear away inconsistent views.⁸²

The efficacy of *elenchus* (and dialectic more generally) rests on assumptions about human psychology that, as Stoics, both Epictetus and Seneca share. Humans want to live free from error and distress, and they recognize self-contradiction as error, which they thus seek to resolve in the way that seems accurate.⁸³ At the same time, the mind has an innate and foundational orientation towards the truth in the forms of both this distaste for contradiction and also preconceptions that provide an essentially accurate framework of basic, if nebulous, commitments.⁸⁴ Indisputably show someone that what they reject as paradoxical is in fact not, in light of their other more committed and fundamentally accurate views, and she will accept it, rejecting what she now sees as inconsistent. Epictetus and Seneca part ways, I suggest, in accepting and rejecting, respectively, the efficacy of dialectic to refute the core yet erroneous beliefs about ourselves – e.g. that we are, on the whole, good and act well, reasonably, and beneficially when possible – that motivate our self-deceiving projection and thus

⁸¹ See e.g. *Diss.* 3.22.26, *Diss.* 3.23.30, and *Diss.* 1.4.14 for Epictetus with Long (2002) 54-61 and *Ep.* 28, *Ep.* 60, and *Ep.* 96 for Seneca with Setaioli (2000) 111-126 and 141-155.

⁸² Long (2002) 54-57 and 67-94. On Socrates' procedure in the *Gorgias*, see Chapter One Section IV. Important to note, this Socratic-Epictetan *elenchus* is *not* synonymous with the broader genre of philosophical dialogue, which is obvious when one compares Cicero's philosophical *dialogi* with the "early," "Socratic" dialogues of Plato. Thus, even though scholars rightly think of the *Letters* as one side of a topically and temporally extended philosophical dialogue, this need not necessitate seeing the operation of *elenchus* in them.

⁸³ For this claim in Epictetus, see, esp., *Diss.* 2.26; for it in Seneca, see, e.g., *Ep.* 94.68-69, *Ep.* 95.57, and *Ep.* 120.19.

⁸⁴ On these in Epictetus, see *Diss.* 2.11.1-8 and *Diss.* 1.22 with Long (2002) 74-86. On preconceptions in Seneca, see Chapter Two Section III.A.

obscure our projecting self-ignorance from ourselves.⁸⁵ While Epictetus, like Seneca, is alive to the role of our thinking's affective coloring in the efficacy of dialectic, Seneca sees it as a particularly potent impediment that merits taking a less direct and non-dialectical initial approach against it. Only upon developing an initial yet stable attention to our projecting self-ignorance, Seneca seems to think, will dialectic be ethically salutary.

Epictetus is well aware of the motivated reasoning and self-deceiving projection of the foolish mind, and, like Seneca, he raises problems these create for the reformatory power of dialectic. Yet, while both Epictetus and Seneca raise their critiques in explicit reference to syllogistic dialectic, Seneca takes aim not only at syllogism but even, arguably, just as directly at *elenchus*. In *Diss.* 2.21.1-7, Epictetus details how people are willing – if grudgingly – to admit their faults, but only if they do not consider them shameful (αἰσχρά; 4.4) due to being at least partly involuntary (ἄκούσιον; 7.4). Like the “blind fools” of *Ep.* 50, these individuals may admit to vicious behavior but only because it's unavoidable in their eyes (*Diss.* 2.21.6-7). In so far as they won't, thus, acknowledge being foolish or unjust (§1-2), dialectical syllogism will fail to actually persuade them or change their minds. They study philosophy only, as it were, academically (cf. §10), for the sake of understanding and being conversant in Stoic principles and the syllogistic arguments in their favor (§17), rather than for “laying [sc. their commitments] aside or correcting them or exchanging some for others” (§16) – not unlike the fools of *Ep.* 59 who deceive themselves in flattery and fail to take philosophical teachings to heart (cf. *neq apertis pectoribus haurimus*; 9.8-9).⁸⁶ Epictetus' central concern about dialectic is his interlocutors' failure to consider these arguments as even potentially true and so actually

⁸⁵ If Long (2002) 85 is right, as I think he is, that Epictetus aims to train his students to engage in *elenchus* on and by themselves, then Seneca's own doubts become that much more pressing, as it seems plausible that we would be especially prone to motivated reasoning when it comes to investigating ourselves (and hence Seneca's strident call to “even offend” ourselves in self-examination [*Ep.* 28.9]).

⁸⁶ Cf. *Ep.* 82.8 and *Ep.* 115.18.

adopt their conclusions. That their conclusions are paradoxical is, in this context at least, incidental.

Seneca's *Letters* also directly question the persuasive ability of syllogistic dialectic, but focus on the state of mind it effects rather than the state of mind one may bring to it. Seneca argues that when one attempts to change another's mind through formal dialectic "the interlocutor thinks himself deceived and, when led to an admission, says one thing but believes another" (*circumscribi se qui interrogatur existimat et ad confessionem perductus aliud repondet, aliud putat*; *Ep.* 82.19.8-10).⁸⁷ Seneca levels this critique explicitly against syllogistic dialectic, in particular Zeno's *interrogationes*, but it seems equally aimed at Socratic *elenchus*, for it clearly recalls a common complaint of Socrates' interlocutors in Plato's dialogues.⁸⁸ Consider the *Republic*'s Adeimantos, who chides Socrates that his *elenchus* leads those inexperienced in its practice little by little until, like checkers players, they are cornered, so to speak, by words and believe only that they have been outmaneuvered but not proven wrong (487b-c).⁸⁹ While Seneca is concerned elsewhere in the *Letters* that students of philosophy may not use dialectical argument as a way of improving their own ethical states,⁹⁰ here he fears that the very procedure of dialectic will set off counter-productive, defensive thinking when brought to bear on cen-

⁸⁷ Cf. *Ep.* 48.10, *Ep.* 87.41, and *Ep.* 106.11. For a similar argument in Cicero, see *Ac.* 2.46 and *Tusc.* 1.16. On the thematic, rhetorical, and philosophical aspects of *Ep.* 82 as a whole, see Wilson (2008). Katja Vogt has rightly questioned in conversation with me where dialectic as a mutual, disinterested pursuit of truth fits into this picture. That is, what about the dialectic done between Socrates and Glaucon in the *Republic* or Theaetetus in the *Theaetetus*? The distinction, as I see it, is that Glaucon, Theaetetus, and those amenable to dialectical persuasion (unlike, e.g., the Euthypros of the *Dialogues*), are already quite advanced precisely in their amenability. Like the Lucilius (or, perhaps, the presumed reader) of the later, more dialectical letters, these interlocutors are by now of a state of mind – arguably in no small part because of their friend Socrates – that dialectic doesn't set off defensive thinking. Indeed that they are Socrates' *friends* strikes me as a particularly important facet of their willingness to be persuaded, and this relates directly to the importance I have tried to place on Seneca's emphasis on affability.

⁸⁸ As Barnes (1997b) 16-17 argues, we need not see Seneca's objection to Zeno's dialectical syllogisms as an objection to Zeno's intended use of them (on this, see Schofield (1983)), for Seneca doesn't object to Zeno himself, but rather to those who use his syllogisms thinking they will in fact change the interlocutor's mind.

⁸⁹ Cf. *Euth.* 11b-d, *Hip. Min.* 369b-c, and *Meno* 79e-80a.

⁹⁰ See, e.g. *Ep.* 108.23, *Ep.* 82.8, *Ep.* 45, and *Ep.* 48.

tral yet false commitments that are “impressed from earliest infancy” (cf. *protinus infantia in-buitur*; *Ep.* 82.23.4).⁹¹ Our minds work towards consistency and (the Stoics hold) ultimately truth, but when some of the very foundation of our worldview is flawed, this natural motion towards coherency can work against us, unless handled carefully. Unlike in Epictetus, the paradoxicality involved in dialectic is of essential concern for Seneca.

Our projecting self-ignorance comprises a nexus of precisely such dearly held core beliefs about ourselves which dialectic will struggle to refute. It is in this context that Seneca’s methodology in the *Letters* is distinct from Epictetus, through its different use of paradoxicality as a persuasive tool. Although Epictetus acknowledges the uphill battle that *elenchus* often faces and its limitations against men unwilling or unable to reason, the *Discourses* present it as an effective mechanism for fostering an awareness of our projecting self-ignorance.⁹² In *Diss.* 1.11, Epictetus refutes a grieving father’s claim that his flight from his ailing daughter’s bedside was at least justifiable in so far as it was driven by a “natural” (cf. φυσικῶς; 5.1) impulse – i.e. one that could not have been helped – and, in particular, that of familial affection (φιλοστοργία; 26.2, cf. the putatively “involuntary” *akrasia* driven by love in *Diss.* 2.21.7).⁹³ The *elenchus* pivots on Epictetus’ exposure of two points of paradoxicality. First, the father admits that his justificatory notion of “natural” as what usually occurs would

⁹¹ Cf. Graver (1996) 121 n. 26 and 196, who emphasizes the challenge that the “highly charged” quality of the fool’s beliefs pose for formal dialectic and its insufficiently complex premises. While it is not the case that dialectic *per se* necessarily leads to paradoxical conclusions, this is the case for Stoicism, insofar as many of its central tenets are paradoxical to a commonplace worldview.

⁹² On an interlocutor’s resistance or rejection of *elenchus*, see, e.g., *Diss.* 3.1.19-23 and *Diss.* 4.5.21. See *Diss.* 2.14.20 for an interlocutor’s hostility towards *elenchus* precisely because through it Epictetus will show that the interlocutor does not recognize his own disordered mental and ethical state.

⁹³ Cf. Dobbin (1998) 132-135. *Contra* Dobbin (1998) 134, I don’t think we should understand this *philostorgia* as the homonymous Stoic notion of the natural disposition humans feel towards through relatives (especially between parents and children) (see Diogenes Laertius 7.120). Epictetus’ use of *philostorgia* here seems to refer to a species of a natural, non-rational affection (he develops but does not presume a Stoic framework in *Diss.* 1.11) that the father could suggest justifies or at least excuses his action. On the Socratic elements of this discourse, see Long (2002) 77-79. On this discourse as a whole, see Dobbin (1998) 111-136.

(unacceptably) make both tumors and our errors good (§7). And second, he accepts at §20-24 (1) that it would be “absurd” (ἄτοπον; 24.5) to justify his own action on account of familial affection while (as he first does) expecting others, due to the same affection, to do the opposite. The father’s erroneous views now presumed to be out of the way, Epictetus has the opportunity to introduce the Stoic position.

What matters for us now is how this *elenchus* operates by bringing the father to see the substantive paradoxicality of his justifications.⁹⁴ They contradict his other, more committed views, and so, as *Disc.* 1.11 has it, he gives them up. The father is thus left without a view concerning “what moved him” (ἦν τὸ κινῆσάν; 27.1). And in response to this, Epictetus proposes the Stoic position and so details our projecting self-ignorance and self-deceiving projection, to the father’s affirmation: What we do, say, and feel is the result of “that it seemed fitting to us” (ὅτι ἔδοξεν ἡμῖν) (§28-29). In consequence, drawing out the commitment needed to counteract our projecting self-ignorance, Epictetus proposes that since the cause of our actions and reactions is not externals but only “our thinking and commitments about them” (ὑπολήψεις καὶ δόγματα; 33.4), we are wrong to blame anything other than these when we go wrong, and we should thus work to remove these views rather than externals (§33-37). Epictetus makes no mention that these new commitments would be paradoxical to the worldview the father had earlier in their discussion, and the discourse’s conceit is that the *elenchus* can and has in fact cleared away the competing views. To Epictetus’ proposition, the father gives unqualified support (cf. 30.1 and 34.1) and indeed seems to have already adopted an appropriate humility (cf. εὐχομαι; 38.5). The father pushes back once, early

⁹⁴ Recall from Chapter One Section III and Chapter Two (1) that a substantive paradox contradicts our worldview, whereas a superficial one only seems to contradict our worldview and (2) that according to the Stoic system, paradoxical truths will be both substantively and superficially paradoxical, in respect to different commitments within the common worldview, although the “ratio” of substantiality to superficiality will vary given the paradoxical truth and the particular worldview.

on, when, having conceded that he cannot justify his action, he shifts the onus of proof onto Epictetus (§8). Of course, this episode of *elenchus* is rather cursory and ideal. We may imagine the interlocutor objecting, drawing out the back-and-forth at various points, or simply leaving in frustration.⁹⁵ But the process, if it continues, would remain fundamentally the same.

The *Letters* work on the assumption that it is unreasonable to expect much success from this *elenchus* (and other dialectical procedures) when, as is the case with projecting self-ignorance, it works to refute core commitments about the self that invite strongly affective thinking. Even the *Discourses* in *Diss.* 2.14 admit that while someone might endure being shown, via *elenchus*, that he is ignorant about the fundamentals (e.g. *eudaimonia*, god, man, the good and bad), he cannot but angrily reject as *hubris* the exposure “that he is ignorant of himself” (20.1-2) and that his actions and worldview are in fact “feverish,” “base” (ταπειναί), or “contradictory” (§22).⁹⁶ The *Letters* emphasize that we should expect ashamed avoidance (*Ep.* 50.5), dissembling (*Ep.* 53.5-7), or even violent anger (*Ep.* 71.22) to accompany and motivate the self-deceiving thinking that rejects - ultimately as mere verbal trickery (*Ep.* 82.19) - the dialectic that attempts to reveal our projecting self-ignorance.⁹⁷ This is not to suggest, however, that Seneca’s *Letters* entirely forgoes a dialectical approach to projecting self-ignorance. But when he does engage in this dialectic in the later, more theoretical letters, he takes a more conciliatory approach than Epictetus.

⁹⁵ E.g., even if the father wasn’t motivated by an involuntary familial affection, could he not have been motivated by some other still involuntary emotion?

⁹⁶ Equally, we would expect the father of *Diss.* 1.11 to respond more defensively to the *elenchus* given *Diss.* 2.21, for his justification of “familial affection” is the sort we saw identified in *Diss.* 2.21 that fails to elicit shame only because it is thought unavoidable.

⁹⁷ The avoidance motivated by projecting self-ignorance can also take the form of humor; see *Ep.* 29. Cf. Schafer (2011) 50: “Although rationality is the summit of human perfection, the means by which it is reached are not exclusively rationalist. In claiming this, the *Letters* can be shown to be not only an argument for Stoicism but also an argument within Stoicism, against partisans of purely doctrinal, technical, rational instruction.”

If Epictetus takes a page from the *Gorgias*'s Socrates in his use of *elenchus*, we may see Seneca as taking a different one in his more dialectical moves against projecting self-ignorance. In *Ep.* 71, rather than drawing attention to the substantive paradoxicality of certain claims to-be-rejected as Epictetus does, Seneca shifts and keeps our attention on the proposed superficial paradoxicality of the claims to-be-accepted.⁹⁸ At first, in §22, Seneca acknowledges that a person will grow angry – “shak[e] his fists in [Seneca’s] face” (*in oculos nunc mihi manus intentat*; 22.1) – at the paradoxical suggestion that the superior sage finds virtuous defeat as good as victory, because in his projecting self-ignorance this fool “interprets virtue from the perspective of his own weakness” (*ex infirmitate sua ferunt de virtute sententiam*; 22.6-7).⁹⁹ Instead of inviting such defensive thinking through addressing this self-ignorance directly, Seneca works to resolve a particular experience of paradoxicality that results from it. As we saw in the previous chapter, at §23 he questions Lucilius and the reader for finding the actual state of affairs – that experiencing pain, if done virtuously, can in fact be beneficial – paradoxical (*quid miraris...?*; 1).¹⁰⁰ In then drawing on matters our worldview already recognizes as true that accord with this Stoic claim, Seneca highlights the superficiality of our surprise and disbelief in the face of it, which stem ultimately from a conceptual confusion (23.1-6). Seeing this in turn leaves an opening to suggest our projecting self-ignorance (cf. *non ista difficilia sunt natura, sed nos fluvidi et enerves*; 23.7-8). In its result, Seneca’s approach is the same as Epictetus’, but its operation via superficial paradoxicality frames our learning as an accommodation of these new views into our worldview without a profound, substantive revi-

⁹⁸ Epictetus does, at times, note that Stoic truths only seem paradoxical (e.g. *Diss.* 1.25), but he does so rarely and less consistently than Seneca in the *Letters*.

⁹⁹ Cf. *Const.* 3.1-2: “It seems to me that I can see your mind incensed and boiling over as you prepare to exclaim [objections to the paradoxical Stoic claims of the sage’s imperturbability]” (*videor mihi intueri animum tuum incensum et effervescentem, paras adclamare...*).

¹⁰⁰ See Chapter Three Part Section III.A.

sion of our commitments (or at least without a focus on this).¹⁰¹ This more palatable implication – that we may be unclear about a matter, but not utterly wrong – is accentuated by the conciliatory allusion of the argument of §23 to the reader’s putative inferiors (cf. *luxurioso... pigro... delicatus... desidiosus*; 2-4), which leave her with a sense of relative superiority, as the argument moves to the proposition of our projecting self-ignorance and self-deceiving projection that follows.¹⁰²

Still, even this more placating and facilitating dialectic attempts to guide our thinking, piecemeal, to a conclusion that contradicts deeply embedded views we hold about ourselves and our worldview itself, about which any consideration is strongly affectively colored. When Seneca first addresses the awareness of our projecting self-ignorance directly in *Ep.* 50, there is no suggestion that it should not strike us as paradoxical. That Harpaste “does not know that she is blind” – the physical analogue to our mental blindness – is indeed *incredibile sed verum* (2.6-7)¹⁰³ and to accept it depends on a fundamental shift in how we conceive of ourselves and our experience of the cosmos.¹⁰⁴ For a mind unwilling to do this even tentatively, dialectic may be thwarted by the mental equivocation, dissimulation, and motivated reinterpretation that keep the mind unchanged, even at the very moment that the interlocutor may seem to be “forced” to accept. Before even conciliatory dialectical arguments are likely to cement and flesh out, so to speak, our awareness of our projecting self-ignorance,

¹⁰¹ As we saw in Chapter Three, these Stoic views will be both substantively and superficially paradoxical relative to different nexuses of commitments within a worldview. But someone presenting and arguing for these views before another can still choose to draw attention to one or the other sort of paradoxicality by raising different questions and guiding the listener to consider different commitments.

¹⁰² Cf. Seneca’s approach to Lucilius’ friend Marcellinus in *Ep.* 29, where he works to convince Marcellinus to change himself for the better through showing him “of how much more worth he was back when others thought less of him” (8.1-2)

¹⁰³ That *incredibilis sed vera* glosses “paradoxical,” cf. *Ben.* 2.31.1 and Section II of Chapter One.

¹⁰⁴ According to Stoic epistemology and psychology, there will be commitments already in our worldview consistent with the truth of our projecting self-ignorance. My suggestion is simply that, be that as it may, grasping our projecting self-ignorance requires profound revision of fundamental and deeply held views within our worldview, and as such is more substantive than superficial.

Seneca implements other forms of demonstration that navigate a fine line between forceful clarity and inviting agreeableness. Seneca's use of first-person narrative is one such form prominent in the *Letters*.

(B) Exemplarity, mimesis, and projecting self-ignorance

Ep. 38 programmatically emphasizes that the “friendly” tone (cf. *familiaritatis*; 1.4) and “gentler words” (*submissiora verba*; 1.8) of the *Letters* as “conversations” (*sermones*) most effectively brings about substantive change in the minds of its reader.¹⁰⁵ In a “suitable” (*idoneum*) mind, Seneca argues, just a few words may effect great change, just as tiny seeds grow into trees (§2).¹⁰⁶ Yet *Ep.* 38 only tells a part of the story, for the didactic force of words has its limits, especially when fostering self-awareness. Even if the (Stoic) mind functions only via thinking, the source of a thought plays a role in how its content appears to the mind and how the mind engages with the thought.¹⁰⁷ One important upshot: something perceived will be, by this very fact, more readily accepted as so than the same thing merely considered abstractly. In *Ep.* 6, Seneca declares to Lucilius that he has been “transformed” (*transfigurari*; 1.1), not so much because he has removed many of his flaws, but because his mind, “brought to a better place” (*in melius translatus*), “sees its own faults, which thus far it was unaware of” (*vitia sua quae adhuc ignorabat videt*; 1.5-6).¹⁰⁸ Books, Seneca asserts, got him there, and he promises to send his annotated copies to Lucilius (§4). Yet he immediately qualifies this aid:

¹⁰⁵ For Seneca's characterizations of his letters as “conversations,” see also *Ep.* 67.2 and *Ep.* 75.1.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. the negative instances of this surveyed in *Ep.* 123.8-9. On *Ep.* 38 and the nature of philosophical *sermo* in the *Letters*, see Setaioli (2000), Griffin (2007), Schönegg (1999) 53-56, and Wilson (2008).

¹⁰⁷ See, esp., Frede (1986) and (1987).

¹⁰⁸ On *Ep.* 6, see Henderson (2004) 12-13, Richardson-Hay (2006) 229-247, Dressler (2012) 164-165, and Scarpata (1975) 114-125.

Nonetheless, both the living voice and real company [*convictus*] will benefit you more than a formal tract [*oratio*]. It behooves you to come before the matter at hand [*in rem praesentem*], since, first off, people trust their eyes more than their ears, and, secondly, the journey by means of precepts is long, but short and potent [*efficax*] by means of *exempla*. (5.4-7)

Philosophers like Zeno, Socrates, and Epicurus had such effect on their followers not so much by their teachings alone, but by exemplifying them as they taught (cf. *observavit illum, an ex formula sua viveret*; 6.2-3).¹⁰⁹ Nor need *exempla* be such famous figures. In *Ep.* 30, Seneca tells us that his philosophical conversations and interactions with his friend Aufidius Bassus, who was presently in the process of dying, were more compelling for this reason. Bassus' arguments against the fear of death had "the utmost authority" (*primum... auctoritatis*; 7.4-5) precisely because he was making them "with death just next door [*de morte vicina*]" (7.5). Those who make arguments against the fear of death may well change their minds when actually faced with it (7.1-4), and thus Bassus' arguments, although the same, are more persuasive because it is "as if he were announcing death's nature when scrutinized, as it were, up close" (*qualis esset eius natura velut proprius inspectae indicantem*; 9.3-4).¹¹⁰ At the same time, the direct evidence of the "evil" of death failing to have the effect we think must follow will go far in undermining the supposed obviousness of such an evaluation.

However, as scholars have recognized, even as *Ep.* 6 draws attention to this division between written word and actualized exemplarity, the letter equally blurs it.¹¹¹ Seneca closes this letter with a quotation from the Stoic philosopher Hecato, yet treats reading his work as

¹⁰⁹ We need not see any implication of irrationality in this suggestion. Even as our acceptance of a claim follows (or should follow) solely from having good reasons to do so, we might reasonably think that the empirical (i.e. observational) evidence of someone living what seems to be a good life through holding and acting on certain commitments relating to the good life speaks in favor of their truth. Of course, a critical mind would recognize this as merely anecdotal evidence, but evidence all the same.

¹¹⁰ See Wilcox (2012) 134-137 on *Ep.* 30 and exemplarity.

¹¹¹ See Wilcox (2012) 120-124 and 132-133, Henderson (2004) 12-13, and Dressler (2012) 164-166. Cf. Schönegg (1999) 91-93 on the *Letters* as a whole.

the same as being in his presence (*quid me hodie apud Hecatonem delectaverit dicam*; 7.1-2).¹¹² At the other end of the letter, the strikingly literary language of *emendari* (5.1; cf. *translati*) used by Seneca to describe his transformation hints at a collapsed separation between letter writer and letter, a sort of complex identification that, Amanda Wilcox shows, Seneca carefully builds throughout the first half of the *Letters*.¹¹³ This collapse in the *Letters* brings with it “the implication that an *exemplum* relayed in a letter can be a valid proxy for [direct] experience.”¹¹⁴ And through this, together with Seneca’s sophisticated development of his and Lucilius’ characters, their philosophical friendship, and his implicit invitation to his reader to assume the mantle of “Lucilius,” Wilcox argues that

the reader adjusts from looking for Seneca to seeing “Seneca” in the letters, [such that] by Book 6 she is ready to learn from the exemplary series of letters that feature both the author and the persona, without being unduly concerned or distracted by the imperfect overlap between the two.¹¹⁵

That is, she comes to take on the same relationship to the “Seneca” within the letters as Seneca does to Bassus in *Ep.* 30, in which she can effectively learn from an interaction with someone else’s direct experience and instruction.¹¹⁶ In Seneca’s *Letters*, exemplarity in writing, as a “proxy for experience,” can, after all, provide a potent semblance of the immediacy of actual *exempla* and, with it, its unique didactic and epistemic force.¹¹⁷ And while, as Wilcox notes, the clearest indications that Seneca’s own experience offers an *exemplum* come only in the first half of Book 6 (*Ep.* 53-57), *Ep.* 6 initiates this as a strong implication and marks him

¹¹² Henderson (2004) 12-13.

¹¹³ Wilcox (2012) 132-156.

¹¹⁴ Wilcox (2012) 133. Cf. Roller (2015) on Seneca’s critique and adaptation of customary “exemplary discourse” in his writings.

¹¹⁵ Wilcox (2012) 136-137.

¹¹⁶ Wilcox (2012) 137.

¹¹⁷ See, esp., Schafer (2011) on the exemplarity of the *Letters* as a whole, in particular one of Stoic and Senecan pedagogy with Mayer (2008). On historical and philosophical *exempla* in Seneca, see Roller (2015), Castagna (1991), Wilcox (2006), Newman (1989) 1491-1493, and Mayer (2008).

as an *exemplum* not just of a committed yet struggling *proficiens* but, more to the point, of one that works at developing self-awareness.¹¹⁸ This latter aspect of Seneca-cum-*exemplum*, we will see, remains beyond *Ep.* 6 in the scenes of his first-hand experience.

The ability of *exempla* to embody and convincingly convey the “the matter at hand” (*rem praesentem*) positions them amongst a small handful of tools recognized by Seneca as uniquely revelatory. Seneca’s corpus speaks of “the matter at hand” almost exclusively in reference to what the fool’s own condition works against her seeing, with little aid available from formal argument.¹¹⁹ In these cases, something else is needed. In *On Anger*, Seneca offers Sextius’ advice that the angry – deaf to reasoning (cf. 2.3) – may calm down upon seeing themselves in a mirror, for “their transformation [*mutatio sui*] is so great that it shock[s] them; brought, as it were, before the matter at hand [*velut in rem praesentem adducti*], they [do] not recognize themselves” (2.36.2-3).¹²⁰ But so too can other forms of discourse provide such a “technology.” Seneca poses in the *Letters* that

I think [analogies, *parabola*] are necessary, not for the same reason as poets, but to serve as crutches [*adminicula*] for our weakness [*inbecillitatis*] in order to bring both speaker and listener before the matter at hand [*in rem praesentem adducant*]. (*Ep.* 59.6.7-10)¹²¹

While more can be said about the precise cognitive mechanisms of these tools, the general point is clear enough: certain forms of demonstration are able to work against our foolish

¹¹⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 50.2: “if I ever wish to be amused by a clown, I do not need to look far: I laugh at myself.” On *Ep.* 6 and Seneca as *exemplum*, cf. Henderson (2004) 12-13, Schafer (2009) 70-71, and Roller (2015) 153.

¹¹⁹ The phrase *res praesens* is surprisingly rare in Seneca, occurring only seven times in all of his works, at *Ira* 2.36, *Ben.* 4.35, *Ep.* 6.5, *Ep.* 30.15, *Ep.* 59.6, *Ep.* 66.35, and *Ep.* 98.18, and all but *Ben.* 4.25 and *Ep.* 66.35 concern something’s having superseded or transcended the illustrative power of most words and/or argument. On the rhetorical theory behind Seneca’s discussion of bringing someone “*in rem praesentem*,” see Ker (2007), and on the nuances of *praesans* alone, Ker (2007) 349-351.

¹²⁰ On this passage, see Ker (2009) 180-182, Bartsch (2006) 21-2 and 187-188, and Setaioli (1988) 370-372.

¹²¹ On this passage and its implications for Senecan metaphor and its cognitive effect, see esp. Bartsch (2009), Armisen-Marchetti (1989), and Gazzarri (2010). Cf. also Ker (2009) 179, who emphasizes Seneca’s claim of metaphor’s “necessity” as a point against Inwood (2005c) 31-38, who suggests that “the point of such comparisons is limited and much must be discarded as theoretically unimportant.”

inability to reason well, our “weakness,” precisely by cutting through it, so to speak, and driving home the point in a way that does not leave us as much room to miss or misconstrue it.¹²² Dialectic will still be vital as the fundamental and ultimate method of achieving Stoic wisdom, but these technologies above (*inter alia*) nonetheless act as an important “ladder to *sapientia* that [the *proficiens*] can throw away once he has stepped off its uppermost rungs.”¹²³

However, like Stoic dialectic, Seneca’s first-person exemplary scenes in the *Letters* use paradoxicality to reveal projecting self-ignorance, but do so in a way that brings the reader “before the matter at hand” as an involved witness of the paradoxical experience of projecting self-ignorance. As has been well noted, Seneca’s first-person narratives are particularly and colloquially descriptive and vivid.¹²⁴ They are mimetic and “something to visualize.”¹²⁵ So too are they scenes of “experiential” learning and accounts of Seneca coming to grasp something or reminding himself of something grasped within a particular thought-provoking event.¹²⁶ And in this, they foster what Beat Schöneegg calls, writing on *Ep.* 57, “pictorial-intuitive comprehension” (*bildhaft-vorbenussten Erfassen*).¹²⁷ Certain precepts such as “know thyself”

strike our affective thinking [*adfectus*] itself and benefit because [our] nature exerts her own force. Minds carry seeds of everything right [*bonestorum*], seeds that are excited by precept-giving [*admonitione*], not unlike how a spark develops [*explicat*] into a fire by the aid of a fanned flame. Virtue is stirred up when touched and incited [*impulsa*]. In addition, there are some things already in the mind but too little at hand [*prompta*],

¹²² On the potential cognitive mechanism of metaphor in a Stoic system, see Bartsch (2009) and Dressler (2012). On the philosophical mechanism of *analogia* in Seneca, see Inwood (2005c) 271-301. On aspects of the philosophical mechanism of metaphor in general, see Crowther (2003).

¹²³ Bartsch (2009) 214. Bartsch speaks here only of metaphor, but her point stands for the other tools.

¹²⁴ See, e.g., Henderson (2004), Richardson-Hay (2006) 351 on *Ep.* 12 (“This passage deals solely with Seneca as an old man and vulnerable human being, and the description is alive with his emotions as he comes to terms with this knowledge”), and Watson and Watson (2009).

¹²⁵ Henderson (2004) 19.

¹²⁶ See, e.g., Motto and Clark (1971), Hachmann (1995) 257-262, Schafer (2011) 45-46, and Mazzoli (1991).

¹²⁷ Schöneegg (1999) 81.

and these began to be developed when put into words. Certain things lie scattered in unconnected [*diversis*] places, which an unpracticed [*inexercitata*] mind is unable to unite, and so they need to be made coherent [*in unum conferenda sunt et iungenda*] in order that they may strengthen the mind and elevate it more. (*Ep.* 94.29)¹²⁸

Yet if precepts have this force, *exempla* – as physical embodiments of *praecepta* (*Ep.* 95.66) – have it that much more (*Ep.* 94.40-42, cf. “the journey by means of precepts is long, but short and potent by means of *exempla*”; *Ep.* 6.5.4-7).¹²⁹

Taken together, these features operate on two levels: On one level, Seneca recreates circumstances of the world he supposedly witnessed and took part in, from which he draws and intends to spark in us certain ethical conclusions. At this level of mimesis, Seneca – both as letter writer and participant in the scene – provides an *exemplum* of a *proficiens* who successively makes ethically salutary use of the surroundings and goings-on of daily life.¹³⁰ Yet on a second, less explicit level, I suggest, these first-person narratives present the scenes’ “Seneca” as an *exemplum* of projecting self-ignorance and a growing awareness of it. They constitute mimetic representations of Seneca’s experience; that is, of the recreated circumstances *as* he experienced them through the filter of his (then) worldview. And it is at this level that the paradoxicality within the scenes – both in Seneca’s experience and in the text itself – reveal Seneca’s self-deceiving projection and the underlying projecting self-ignorance. In this, we are equally invited indirectly to recognize this in ourselves. On the one hand, these scenes offer immediate and targeted opportunities to foster the sort of observations that Seneca explicitly announces later in the *Letters*:

Whether you want to look at others (since judgment concerning others is more unbiased [*liberius*]) or yourself, without prejudice [*favore seposito*], you will recognize [*senties*]

¹²⁸ Cf. *Ep.* 109.8-12 and *Ep.* 115.4-6.

¹²⁹ On these passages, see Schafer (2009) 89-92. See also *Ep.* 39 and *Ep.* 83. Cf. the critical role of *exempla* in our development of the concept of goodness in *Ep.* 120 with Inwood (2005a).

¹³⁰ On Seneca at this level of *exemplum* in these scenes, see esp. Henderson (2006) and (2004) 67-92, Hachmann (1995) 257-262, Mazzoli (1991), and Schafer (2011) 45-46.

and admit [*confiteberis*] that none of the things you wish for and so value are beneficial unless you mentally prepare yourself against their changeability [*levitatem*] and that of fortune [*casus*] and its consequences... (*Ep.* 98.4.1-5)

With such particular instances of Seneca as *exemplum* before our eyes, which we may readily relate to and measure ourselves against, we are more likely to grasp and accept the presence of this ignorance in ourselves.¹³¹ Indeed, on the other hand, these scenes' first-person point of view and their conversational, self-deprecating amiability and, at times, humor increase the reader's willingness to see themselves "without prejudice," such that we truly consider the lessons revealed by the paradoxicality within the scenes rather than react to it with a motivated rejection. At times, such as in *Ep.* 12 and *Ep.* 53, the two layers of mimesis coincide, in so far as Seneca's *meditatio* is immediately related to or indeed precisely a recognition of his own projecting self-ignorance. But even when not so connected, the opportunity and invitation to see Seneca's projecting self-ignorance and see it as a reflection of our own remains a prevalent feature of Seneca's first-person narratives.

(C) The mimetic approach in *Ep.* 12

Let us look at the famous scene in the last letter of Book One of the *Letters*, *Ep.* 12, in which Seneca visits his suburban villa, as the foundation of this mimetic approach and its first extended instance in the *Letters*.¹³² We will then explore this strategy in its most extensive form in the first half of Book 6. We will see how it engages the reader in a progressive analysis of Seneca's experience that ends in distinguishing the fool's self-deception from the affections unavoidable to mortals, sage and alike, and so predisposes the reader to interpret

¹³¹ This is a good psychological intuition on Seneca's part. Modern psychologists have found that people are far more likely to expect to see and recognize the manifestation of a general psychological tendency in individuals (including themselves) if shown a few examples of individuals manifesting it than if given a full and even accepted explanation of the tendency (see, e.g. studies collected in Kahneman (2013) 170-174).

¹³² On *Ep.* 12, see Mazzoli (1991) 78-79, Henderson (2004) 19-27, Richardson-Hay (2006) 353-369, Scarpata (1975) 277-303, and Watson and Watson (2009).

the end of *Ep.* 58 as a portrayal of the world we fools experience as a result of our projecting self-ignorance.¹³³

Ep. 12 opens with a first-person narrative of a rather oblivious Seneca:

Wherever I have turned myself, I see signs of my old age. I had come to my suburban villa, and I was complaining about the expenses for this structure that is falling apart. The overseer said to me that it was not a fault of his own negligence: he was doing everything, but the villa was old. This villa sprang up under my direction. What will come of me, if stones of my own age are so decayed? Angry, I seized the closest target for my irritation. “It seems,” I said, “that these plane trees have been disregarded: they have no leaves. How knobby and contorted their branches are! How wretched and neglected their trunks! This would not occur, if someone would fertilize them, if someone would water them!” He swore on my family that he was doing everything, that he attended to each of these things, but that they were senescent. Just between us, I had planted those trees. I had seen their first bloom. Then I turned to the doorman and asked, “Who is this? This decrepit man who is rightly put at the door, for he is on his way out? Where did you find this man? Why did it delight you to filch someone else’s dead?” But that man asked, “Do you not recognize me? I am Felicio, to whom you used to bring little presents. I am the son of the overseer Philositus – your little dear-one.” “Great,” I said, “This man is insane: has he become a young child, even my playmate? By all means, it is conceivable: his teeth have entirely fallen out.”

Quocumque me verti, argumenta senectutis meae video. Veneram in suburbanum meum et querebar de impensis aedificii dilabentis. Ait vilicus mihi non esse negligentiae suae vitium, omnia se facere, sed villam veterem esse. Haec villa inter manus meas crevit: quid mihi futurum est, si tam putria sunt aetatis meae saxa? Iratus illi proximam occasionem stomachandi arripio. ‘Apparet’ inquam ‘has platanos negligi: nullas habent frondes. Quam nodosi sunt et retorridi rami, quam tristes et squalidi trunci! Hoc non accideret si quis has circumfoderet, si inrigaret.’ Iurat per genium meum se omnia facere, in nulla re cessare curam suam, sed illas vetulas esse. Quod intra nos sit, ego illas posueram, ego illarum primum videram folium. Conversus ad ianuam ‘quis est iste?’ inquam ‘iste decrepitus et merito ad ostium admotus? foras enim spectat. Unde istunc nactus es? quid te delectavit alienum mortuum tollere?’ At ille ‘non cognosci me?’ inquit: ‘ego sum Felicio, cui solebas sigillaria adferre; ego sum Philositi vilici filius, deliciolum tuum’. ‘Perfecte’ inquam ‘iste delirat: pupulus, etiam delicium meum factus est? Prorsus potest fieri: dentes illi cum maxime cadunt.’ (§1-3)

From this experience, the lesson of concern for the Seneca now recounting this narrative is that he has learned never to lose sight of the ever-present *argumenta* of his aging, and the an-

¹³³ On this, see Chapter Three Section IV.

ger and distress expressed by the scene's Seneca in his self-ignorance has given way to gratitude (cf. *debeo hoc suburbano meo...*; 4.1) in the Seneca who has since grown wiser. And for the rest of the letter Seneca offers further lessons tied back to this earlier scene: A skillfully lived old-age carries its own pleasures (§4-5), which we would see if only we ceased to fear facing our mortality (6.1). Against this fear, Seneca reframes the letter's opening (*quocumque me verti...*) into a reflection on the mortal life cycle as a series of "homologous" concentric circles (6.5-6) centered around the cycle of one "Heraclitean" day "equal to all" (7.3).¹³⁴ A well-used (*ordinandus*) day "completes and fills out [our] life" (8.2), and so each new day – at least to the good – is not a loss of life but a "profit" (*ad lucrum*; 9.7) to be grateful for.¹³⁵

In addition to acting as the quotidian launching point for the philosophical reflections that follow in the rest of the letter, the initial scene of *Ep.* 12 more subtly looks forward to these latter arguments. As Michele Ronnick points out, the concentric, cyclical lifetime of §6 is itself embodied by Seneca in the opening scene through the creation of "a 'landscape' of himself, past, present, and future."¹³⁶ His memories of what was abruptly meets his present, aged reality, through which he envisions his future death. And James Ker lays out how the scene's movement from inanimate villa to tree to rational, human slave both represents the traditional *scala naturae* and culminates in a figure, Felicio, who acts as a mirror that reflects not only Seneca's own age but also his own ethically compromised behavior.¹³⁷ In the rest of the letter, Ker argues, Seneca combines these two features in moving from a recognition of his "external" identity as an old man to a reformation of his "internal"

¹³⁴ Henderson (2006) 24-25. See also Habinek (1982) and Ker (2002) 97-109.

¹³⁵ Cf. Ker (2002) 101-102.

¹³⁶ Ronnick (1999) 222.

¹³⁷ Ker (2002) 91-97.

identity as a rational animal (in accordance with the *scala naturae*) through turning the single day into a mirror with which we may view and control the quality of our whole lives.¹³⁸

If reconfigured, these same effects – the opening scene’s “landscape” as a reflection of the “asymmetry” of Seneca’s “inner world and his outer environment,”¹³⁹ and its transformative mirroring – equally suggest the opening scene as an *exemplum* of the faulty thinking involved in projecting self-ignorance and the struggle against it. Of course, this *exemplum* functions alongside the other forms of Seneca’s negative exemplarity variously recognized here by scholars, such as by his proactive reaction of anger towards his overseer and derisive, cruel treatment of an enslaved human being.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, I am suggesting a deeper although by no means more ethically significant exemplarity of why it is that Seneca reacts as he does rather than with self-recognition. A key facet of this reconfiguration is driven by Patricia and Lindsay Watson’s suggestion that this scene is “so artfully contrived” that it should strike the reader as, by-and-large, a work of fiction.¹⁴¹ The figures that Seneca meet – the villa, trees, and his slave – are too neatly symbolic of old age, too perfectly fit for the letter’s language of decrepitude equally apt for humans,¹⁴² and described in such hyperbolically and paradoxically poor condition to be believable as descriptions of real events. Indeed, we might add, it is rather hard to believe that anyone could be *that* oblivious to his old age (and that Seneca expects us to accept this). On the one hand, this hint of invention need not indicate a wholly unrealistic event nor insinuate a veiled, potentially off-putting arrogance in Seneca’s self-

¹³⁸ Ker (2002) 96-109.

¹³⁹ Ronnick (1999) 222.

¹⁴⁰ That the reader is meant to see Seneca’s treatment of the slave Felicio as itself unethical, compare the reverse “humanization” of slaves in *Ep.* 47. On Seneca and slavery, see Rist (1989) 2008-2009, Watts (1972), and Manning (1989).

¹⁴¹ Watson and Watson (2009) 213-221.

¹⁴² E.g. *putria* to describe the villa at 1.6 and *nodosi* to describe the trees at 2.3.

deprecation. Beginning in *Ep.* 1, Seneca is unqualifiedly adamant about his continued foolishness, even if he allows himself some progress (cf. §3-5).¹⁴³ If Seneca manipulates a scene of self-deprecation for effect, it is not to (or at least need not) suggest he is in fact beyond such criticism but rather, we will see, precisely to accentuate particular aspects of his past failures as if – in the epistolary conceit of *amicitia* so carefully constructed in the *Letters*¹⁴⁴ – to attempt to most effectively convey a well-intentioned warning from experience.¹⁴⁵ So, on the other hand, and more to the present point, this readily apparent fictiveness serves a pedagogical purpose. The scene directs the reader’s incredulity at Seneca’s own interpretations of his surroundings and brings to her attention not just that the scene’s Seneca fails to recognize his own condition, but also how this self-ignorance and the beliefs that motivate it are the source of his distress.

In opening this scene with his remark that “I see signs [*argumenta*] of my old age,” Seneca makes central the role of interpretation and extrapolation in his experience, inviting our own in reading of it. The first exchange between Seneca and his overseer about his villa at §1.2-6 illustrates the now-familiar misinterpretation of self-deceptive projection. Seneca sees what is simply old (*veterem*; 1.4) as ruined (*dilabentis*; 1.3). And in blaming his overseer for costing him money (*inpensis*; 1.2) to repair his villa on account of neglect (*neglegentiae*; 1.2-4), we are reminded, at the end of this book of letters, of its beginning. In *Ep.* 1, Seneca affirms

¹⁴³ See also, e.g., *Ep.* 6.1, *Ep.* 27.1, *Ep.* 45.4, *Ep.* 57.3, and *Ep.* 75.15.

¹⁴⁴ See, e.g., the extensive discussion in Wilcox (2012).

¹⁴⁵ I take it that even if we recognize the scene’s fictiveness, this doesn’t preclude that it represents both a manipulated representation of Seneca’s experience at some time or another and something readers may relate to. Of course, one may still feel put-off by all this, but in a text that makes a personal approach both crucial to the reach and potency of the philosophical message and intimately entwined with it, this is simply an unavoidable risk. It is not a flaw on Seneca’s part, it seems to me, that he cannot speak to everyone. Nor is this a problem for Seneca alone. In the personalized setting of Plato’s dialogues, Socrates’ irony and his avowals of ignorance may equally undermine the philosophy if these strike – not unreasonably – the reader as arrogance and condescension, while they may strike others as protreptic and, at least in the case of the admitted ignorance, invitingly admirable.

that “[moments of time] are most shamefully lost through negligence [*neglegentiam*]” (1.5) and that although he has wasted some of his own lifetime, he knows his expenses (cf. *ratio mihi constat impensae*; 4.3).¹⁴⁶ The Seneca of the opening scene in *Ep.* 12 failed to heed this injunction, keeping close tabs on what is restorable (cf. *vilissima...reparabilia*, *Ep.* 1.3.5) as he fails to attend to the irrevocable passage of time. And Seneca’s experience of this failure, thus, takes on a recognizable form: his villa appears to him *dilabens* due to “the fault [*vitium*] of [his overseer’s] negligence” (1.4), but this is projection. The villa is, in truth, simply *vetus* (1.4), but Seneca’s own “fault,” his negligent self-ignorance of the passing of his life and the concomitant belief that he is not so old, motivates his thinking that the villa is decrepit and neglected. The truth, as is the case for the blind fools later in the *Letters*, is paradoxical to Seneca and as such distressing (cf. *quid...saxa?* 1.5-6). Like the combative fools of *Ep.* 71, Seneca responds in angry denial as he reaches for an excuse and so avoids acknowledgement (*Ep.* 12.2.1-2).

This irate deflection directed at the seemingly sorry state of the villa’s plane trees accentuates two features of Seneca’s interactions that shape how we understand his experience. On the one hand, as often noted, while Seneca’s descriptions of his villa bear a notable but still vague symbolism for human degradation (cf. *dilabentis*; 1.3 and *putria*; 1.6), the trees are made to be “positively humanoid,” particularly in their *tristes* and *squalidi* trunks (2.4).¹⁴⁷ In this they become a barely concealed reflection of Seneca’s own aged body. And yet, on the other hand, the sad state of these trees should be surprising. As the Watsons point out, plane trees were noted in Latin literature precisely for their longevity, in addition to their provision

¹⁴⁶ On the relationship between *Ep.* 1 and *Ep.* 12, see Richardson-Hay (2006) 349-351 and Henderson (2004) 6-7.

¹⁴⁷ Ker (2002) 93. Watson and Watson (2009) 216-218 collect examples in both Seneca’s works and others where *dilabens* and *puter* apply to humans directly or where, as in *Ep.* 30.2 and *Ep.* 58.35, a decrepit body is compared to a decaying building. So too do they collect references for the tree-human duality of the language used to describe the trees.

of shade.¹⁴⁸ Seneca's explicit mention of planting these now barren trees in his own lifetime (2.7-8) connects his own senescence to theirs, but it also raises the question of how famously long-lived trees can be in such bad shape at such a (relatively) young age. Indeed the same question applies to his villa, which "sprang up under [his] direction" (1.5) and yet somehow has stones that are *putria* (1.6). The other villas Seneca's *Letters* explore, such as that of the now 200-years-dead Scipio Africanus in *Ep.* 86, are in seemingly fine physical condition.¹⁴⁹ Where the appearances of Seneca's villa and trees subverts his own expectations based on his self-ignorance, so too do they subvert our own expectations from what Seneca tells us of their age.

Seneca begins to recognize his own old age with the help of this paradoxicality, but for us it may cast doubt on Seneca's own interpretative thinking. In fact, we are motivated all the more in this doubt by Seneca's own admission that his description of the plane trees is as it "appears" (*apparet*; 2.2) to him. This is not to say that our credulity should be strained in the opposite direction, as if Seneca sees agedness where there is none. As his overseer says, the villa and trees are *vetus* (1.4) and *vetulae* (2.7) respectively. Rather, as the account continues, we see Seneca's distinctly myopic focus on and accentuation of a disagreeable disrepair in his surroundings as more of a reflection of his own state of mind than a result of reality. Is the villa really *dilabens*, its stones *putria*, the trees *tristes et squalidi*? Or is it Seneca's fear of old age and death (cf. *quid mihi futurum est...*; 1.5) that renders this scenery so bleak to him? When Seneca comes finally to his old slave, Felicio, he progresses from seeing the aged things around him as in decline to being basically dead: Felicio is "rightly put at the door, for he is

¹⁴⁸ See Watson and Watson (2009) 215 for citations. Ronnick (1999) 225-227 shows how the denuded nature of these plane trees and the lesson on human mortality this provides is a creative twist by Seneca on the plane trees of Plato's *Phaedrus*, which Socrates claims have nothing to teach him (230d).

¹⁴⁹ On these villa scenes, see esp. Henderson (2004).

on his way out [i.e. almost dead]” (3.2-3) and, indeed, he is *mortuum* (3.4). This conceptual paradox reflects Seneca’s conflating worldview, old age as death, and he views Felicio through this lens. Yet this lens clearly obscures reality, for through it, Seneca paradoxically fails to recognize a dear friend (3.4-6). Indeed, the slave’s counter-intuitive name, “Happy,” belies Seneca’s single-mindedly morbid attention and the blinkered experience this engenders. Even now, he resists recognizing himself in the personified mirror of Felicio (cf. *iste delirat*, 3.5). However, whereas Seneca’s anxiety in accepting his own age becomes anger when faced with the plane trees, with Felicio it becomes wry exasperation.

The backfiring humor with which the distressed Seneca responds in this scene integrates this exchange within the self-deceptive projection at work in §1-2. In the first place, we see the same projection as before: Seneca blames the overseer for mismanagement (cf. “Why were you pleased to buy someone else’s dead?”; 3.3-4), when the fault is Seneca’s *neglegentia*, again concerning the passing of time and also, in particular, in failing to recognize Felicio. But, more to the point, Seneca’s witty yet also biting or even cruel jesting about Felicio suggests a different sort of *neglegentia*.¹⁵⁰ *Neglegere* means not only “not to care for” or “not attend to,” but also “to make light of,” “to slight,” and “to despise.”¹⁵¹ In this sense, Felicio has indeed been *neglectus*, but by Seneca, who sees Felicio’s old age as something contemptible and to be mocked, as has, albeit not with humor, the villa and the plane trees. And this aspect of Seneca’s experience and this reaction reflect Seneca’s (former) ignorance rather than reality – that we should not despise old age nor disregard our mortality forms the central elements of the rest of the letter. By the end of the scene, we see in Seneca’s experience not only how his own *neglegentia* of the passing of his life has made him blind to the state of

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Watson and Watson (2009) 220 label the jokes “sneers” and Richardson-Hay (2006) 356 says Seneca “scornfully jeers” at Felicio.

¹⁵¹ Cf. LSJ II.

his estate, but also how his *neglegentia* – viz. his dismissive contempt – for old age both distorts and constrains his experience of reality and also motivates an unconscious refusal to accept what is before his eyes. Indeed, Seneca’s subsequent (avowed) embrace of old age (4.2-3) and his arguments at §6-9 against the objection that “it is distressing... to have death before your eyes” (6.1) center this latter *neglegentia* as fundamental to the former.

Lastly, the humor of Seneca’s exchange with Felicio underscores the critical yet amiable tone of self-criticism of the scene as a whole, which plays a fundamental role in the scene’s didactic function.¹⁵² As scholars have commonly proposed, the scene’s thrust – that the joke is really on Seneca – reveals Seneca (the writer of the letter, not the figure in the scene) “at his most blushingly likeable” in his willingness not only to admit failures but also to do so unflatteringly.¹⁵³ In addition to cautioning against, in a personalized way, ethical failures,¹⁵⁴ these scenes of self-criticism in the *Letters*, of which *Ep.* 12 is the first, are “a strategy pursued by Seneca to render his teachings more palatable by displaying his own moral shortcomings.”¹⁵⁵ Yet the nature and effect of this “palatability,” I suggest, extends beyond merely counteracting our inclination to reject remonstrance we deem hypocritical, at least as it pertains to addressing our self-ignorance.¹⁵⁶

In addition to the work Seneca has already done in *Ep.* 6 to begin to present first-person narrative in the letters as *exempla*, we are clearly meant to see ourselves in some way in the opening scene of *Ep.* 12. Seneca follows it with the exhortation “let *us* embrace [old

¹⁵² On the similarities between this scene and Plautine comedy, see Grant (2000) 320, cf. Thomsen (1971).

¹⁵³ Henderson (2004) 26, cf. Watson and Watson (2009) 219-220 and Richardson-Hay (2006) 37-40.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Richardson-Hay (2006) 37-40.

¹⁵⁵ Watson and Watson (2009) 222, cf. Griffin (1976) 277 and 417 and Edwards (1997) 32-34.

¹⁵⁶ Although scholars note this strategy, they leave it largely unexplained, perhaps because if we assume it only acts as a counteraction against an aversion to hypocrisy, it is simply intuitive. Watson and Watson (2009) 223, for example, elaborate on the purpose of these scenes – in this case Seneca’s exchange with Felicio in particular – as “to show in the most colourful way possible that Seneca himself is not immune to the faults, in this case a lack of self-perception, which he would seek to eradicate in others.”

age] and love it” (4.2-3), and this hortatory subjunctive remains throughout (cf. *recipiamus*, 9.4). More subtly, Henderson insightfully sees in Seneca’s defense of his use of Epicurus at the end of the letter – that it only matter what is said, not who said it, since “the best things are our common property” (*quae optima sunt esse communia*, 11.4-5) – a recommendation to read Seneca’s experience in the opening scene as our own.¹⁵⁷ Equally, the perceptive reader will ultimately see himself reflected in the scene as he reads through it, as he recognizes that the same process described above – viz. paradoxicality undermining one’s acceptance of a current way of conceiving of something – underlies both Seneca’s revelation and their own understanding of Seneca’s experience. Indeed this recognition constitutes, in my opinion, a fundamental point at work in the letter.

But our self-deceptive ignorance risks rendering this insufficient. Against this, on the one hand, the friendly and jocular nature of Seneca’s own self-criticism facilitates our willingness to scrutinize ourselves honestly and so see ourselves in the opening of *Ep.* 12.¹⁵⁸ Broaching the issue in this conciliatory, empathetic, and uncompetitive way, the scene is more likely to avoid triggering the nexus of views concerning our self-image that aligns refutation and critique with denigration and motivates self-deceptive projection. On the other hand, the humor turns a natural response to avoid criticism against itself. We see this at work in *Ep.* 29, where a friend, Marcellinus, who resists Seneca’s attempts to help him see the error of his ways, starts with jokes aimed both at himself and Seneca and so, Seneca writes, “anticipates [*occupabit*, viz. for the sake of humor] everything I am about to say [viz. for the sake of teaching]” (5.3-4).¹⁵⁹ Seneca depicts himself doing this in *Ep.* 12 in a transparent way

¹⁵⁷ Henderson (2004) 27.

¹⁵⁸ One need only think about the utmost importance of non-judgment in a therapist to accept this effect.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. *Const.* 17.2, where Seneca recommends defanging insults lobbed as jokes by making fun of oneself first: “thus the material is taken from those who are insolent and aim at insult through their wit, if you voluntarily

and yet, as he laughs at himself (and invites us to laugh with him), draws lessons – rather than avoids them – in retrospect. In attempting to draw us as equal participants in the ignorance of this scene, Seneca aims to preempt our inclination to respond to his general admonition by downplaying the seriousness of our errors through humorous minimization and so allows us, instead, a chance to see them with an open mind.

IV: Seneca's mimetic approach in Book Six

In addition to Seneca's self-presentation as an *exemplum* of a Stoic *proficiens* in action – at the first mimetic level – in the first half of Book 6 (*Ep.* 53 through 57), the prevalence and centrality of the paradoxical there has not gone unexplored either. Scholars have highlighted the ironic wit and the stylistic and thematic intricacies of Seneca's use of self-contradiction and self-parody in *Ep.* 53, 56 and 57;¹⁶⁰ drawn attention to the paradoxical ambiguity within their epistolary “frames” as a means to display the philosophical complexity of the “here and now”;¹⁶¹ and illustrated how the unexpected in *Ep.* 55 invites the reader's critical eye and the paradoxical in *Ep.* 57 mirrors the “collapse” of reasoning described within it.¹⁶² My approach accepts and pulls from all of these but will suggest a more targeted and unified philosophical and pedagogical thread created by the first person narratives at the second-level of mimesis (as an *exemplum* of the experience of a *proficiens'* mind thinking within and through self-projecting ignorance) that culminates in the “Platonic” scene of §26-28 of *Ep.* 58.¹⁶³ The nar-

anticipate it before him” (*itaque materia petulantibus et per contumeliam urbanis detrabitur, si ultro illam et prior occupes*; 7-8).

¹⁶⁰ See Motto and Clark (1971), (1970), and (1973b) on *Ep.* 53, 56, and 57 respectively, and Grant (2000) 323 and 325 on *Ep.* 53 and 57.

¹⁶¹ Mazzoli (1991) 80-87.

¹⁶² Henderson (2004) 80-90 on *Ep.* 55 and (2006) 142-145 on *Ep.* 57.

¹⁶³ Cf. Schafer (2011) 45-46, who sees a narrative and pedagogical unity based on the supposed absence of Lucilius' letters to Seneca as he travels, which leads to scenes of teaching via personal details (absent details of

rative series of *Ep.* 53 through 57 draws the reader, with a cumulative effect, to interpret Seneca's paradoxical experience as it concerns and reflects his state of mind rather than the nature of the world. This primes the reader to see Seneca's call to distinguish *imaginaria* and *formae* in *Ep.* 58 in the same light, as a synoptic proposal of the paradoxilizing effects of our ignorance and an explicit exhortation to see through our projecting self-ignorance that hides this effect and so do in her own life what she has done and seen Seneca do concerning his own experience in the preceding letters.

Prominent and extended accounts of different aspects of projecting self-ignorance appear at key, evenly spaced points in Book 6. The *oblivio*-dream analogy of the opening *Ep.* 53.5-8 inaugurates Book 6's concern with self-ignorance and the account of dissatisfied inactivity (*inertia sui inpatiens*) at *Ep.* 56.5-11 refocuses our attention on it (see below),¹⁶⁴ as occurs again with Seneca's illustration of self-flattery in *Ep.* 59.9-13 following the self-consciously lengthy and technical *Ep.* 58 (cf. "But I am dragging this [letter] on at length."; 37.1). These explicit discussions anchor projecting self-ignorance as a thematic undercurrent throughout Book 6, at which certain *sententiae* in the theoretical meditations less directly related to self-ignorance signal.¹⁶⁵ The efficacy of these *sententiae* is augmented by their pointedness and paradoxicality, but our concern now is the parallel signaling of the paradoxicality in the first-person narrative series of Book 6 (*Ep.* 53-57) that frame the letters' meditations. It is through tracing this paradoxicality that we can follow the trajectory of the Senecan persona in his developing self-awareness and be drawn into his mode of self-investigation. Essential

Lucilius), which both make Seneca himself "less aloof – but also more conscientious – by showing that he assigns spiritual exercises to himself as well" and also "gently plant in his friend's mind the notion that he can devise his own exercises as well" (45).

¹⁶⁴ On a part of this passage, §5-8, see also Chapter Two Section III.B.

¹⁶⁵ See, e.g., *Ep.* 55.8.1-2: "But location does not contribute much to tranquility: it is the mind that makes everything satisfactory to it" (*sed non multum ad tranquillitatem locus confert: animus est qui sibi commendat omnia*); and *Ep.* 61.3.5: "Someone is miserable not because he does something under orders but because he does something unwillingly" (*non qui iussus aliquid facit miser est, sed qui invitatus facit*). Cf. *Ep.* 54.7.8-9, 60.3.4-6, and 62.1.1-3.

to this exemplarity, we will see, is the potential for the illusion of progress liable to develop when philosophical considerations become detached from self-investigation.

Seneca opens *Ep.* 53 and Book 6 with the question: “What can’t I be persuaded of, when I can be persuaded to sail?” (*Quid non potest mihi persuaderi, cui persuasum est ut navigarem*; 1.1-2). Seneca has commonly opened letters with questions, both personal and theoretical, but this one is unexpected.¹⁶⁶ While sailing was certainly hazardous, the *Letters* have given no indication so far that travel by boat should be something especially daunting. Indeed, Seneca himself, just eight letters earlier, proclaims hyperbolically that not only would he dare to make the notoriously dangerous trip from Italy to see Lucilius in Sicily but he would even brave swimming it.¹⁶⁷ This bravado makes the reversal of *Ep.* 53.1 that much more striking. But of particular significance here is the equally unexpected *form* of Seneca's question. The impersonal or passive use of *persuadere* is rare in the *Letters*, and their even rarer pairing (*persuaderi... persuasum est*) here accentuates in Seneca's thinking a perceived lack of agency, paradoxical in this context of belief formation. Even non-Stoics view our choices as, in one way or another, under our control. Through this counter-intuitively impersonal perspective, Seneca's question initiates a contradictory vacillation between an assumed agency and passivity in his experience that we see him navigate, become aware of, and struggle against throughout the first-person narratives of Book 6.

Seneca's experience of his unsuccessful voyage offers in anecdotal form a refutation to the mindset of projecting self-ignorance that views its environment and circumstances as determinative of its affective experience. As the scene unfolds, the opening question comes to signal not our gullibility towards others (a more natural reading of its passive form) but

¹⁶⁶ See, e.g., in *Ep.* 7, *Ep.* 8, *Ep.* 21, *Ep.* 23, *Ep.* 28, *Ep.* 43, and *Ep.* 52.

¹⁶⁷ *Ep.* 45.2.

rather our ability to convince *ourselves* all too easily. Seneca presents every decision as his own, not only as the result of his consideration but even precisely contrary to others' arguments. He decides to set sail (*solvi*; 1.2, cf. *derexi*; 1.7), after convincing himself (cf. *putavi*; 1.4) that he could make a quick crossing despite being paradoxically certain (*sine dubio*; 1.2) about the uncertain possibility of a storm (cf. *quamvis dubio et independente caelo*; 1.4-5).¹⁶⁸ And when this storm begins to pick up, despite his helmsman's explicit pleading against it at §2.5-7, Seneca forces him – the truly passive one (cf. *vellet nollet*) – to head towards shore (3.4-5).

Yet Seneca's pronounced agency renders the concurrent interpretations of his own passivity both paradoxical and unconvincing. Once setting sail, Seneca recounts at 2.1-3 that "when I had already come to a point where it made no difference to me whether I went on or turned around, that initial tranquility, which had seduced me, vanished" (*cum iam eo processissem ut mea nihil interesset utrum irem an redirem, primum aequalitas illa quae me corruperat perii*). Together with the rather hollow ring of Seneca's plea of deception, given his earlier certainty of risk, his own declaration of a different, inert equanimity (*nihil interesset...*) belies a self-deception that distances him from the active role he plays in his own misadventure. Even Seneca's subsequent and more self-aware thinking at §3 betrays a projecting self-ignorance in its paradoxical passivity. He recognizes that his own distress blinds him to the helmsman's advice ("however I was in too bad a way for the risk [sc. of land] to register," *peius autem vexabar quam ut mihi periculum succurreret*; 1-2), but he blames his cognitive failure to make good use of this dilemma on his body, namely a *nausea* that tortured (*torquebat*; 3.3) him.¹⁶⁹ And a

¹⁶⁸ We may see here a perverse inversion of Seneca's remark at *Ep.* 98.4 that flourishing will only come when one is "certain in the face of the uncertain" (*certus adversus incerta est*), which is echoed elsewhere, such as at *Ben.* 4.34.5 (*consiliis certis incertos eventus expendit* [sc. *sapiens*]).

¹⁶⁹ On this *nausea*, see Wenskus (1994) and Berno (2006) 53-54, cf. Lampe (2008) and Lotito (2001) 15-20.

concluding paradox encapsulates this contradictory inattention to his mind's own power, when, following Seneca's poorly-executed swim to shore at §3.5-4.3, he declares:

It is unbelievable what I endured, because I could not endure myself [*Incredibilia sunt quae tulerim, cum me ferre non possem*]. Know this, that Ulysses faced shipwrecks everywhere not because he was born to an angry sea, but because he got seasick [*nausiator erat*]. And whenever I have to sail, I will also arrive after twenty years.

The reader may first see the initial *sententia* (*incredibilia... possem*) as Seneca's recognition finally of his projecting self-ignorance, that his seemingly unavoidable suffering resulted from his own failure at patience.¹⁷⁰ But Seneca's surprising and self-serving reinterpretation of Ulysses suggests a less enlightened sentiment: If his failure, like Ulysses', is simply the inability to endure his nausea, i.e. to have a higher physical tolerance for discomfort, then *cum me ferre non possem* reflects thinking that paradoxically conflates the passive experience of the body with the active affective thinking about it, such that the latter goes unnoticed. The *sententia*, on this reading, neatly embodies a contradiction that results from Seneca's self-deceptive projection throughout this episode and that, in effect, denies him even the earlier circumscribed agency, for, on closing reflection – however tongue-in-cheek – *any* voyage will bring trouble (“whenever I have to sail...”).¹⁷¹ Even if Seneca's persona seems to miss at first the deeper lesson on projecting self-ignorance of the *sententia* of §4, the deeper lesson and Seneca's seeming grasp of it is confirmed by Seneca's own meditation on our self-deceptive *oblivio* following his experience (§5-8).¹⁷² Yet, for our purposes now, Seneca (the author of the *Letters*) goes on to augment and then upend the expectations we may have now of the progress of Seneca's per-

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Berno (2006) 62-64.

¹⁷¹ On the humor of the passage, cf. Motto and Clark (1971) and Grant (2000) 323, and see below.

¹⁷² And the reoccurrence of the rare phrase *ferre me* in Seneca's remarks later in *Ep.* 96 more clearly concerning projecting self-ignorance confirms this reading. Cf. *Ep.* 96.1.3-5: “If you ask me, I think that there is nothing unsatisfactory for man except whatever is in the cosmos that he deems unsatisfactory. On the day that I am unable to endure something, I will no longer be enduring myself” (*Si me interrogas, nihil puto viro miserum nisi aliquid esse in rerum natura quod putet miserum. Non feram me quo die aliquid ferre non potero.*) See also *Tranq.* 15.2-4. On the rare phrase *ferre me* in Seneca, see Berno (2006) 62-63.

sona in self-awareness, given his *meditatio* in §5-8, as a warning against failing to heed fully *Ep.* 53's central warning of our ability to believe as we want to believe.

At the same time, this remarkable comparison by Seneca between himself and the hero Ulysses signals another coordinating aspect of the development of the Senecan persona as an *exemplum* of projecting self-ignorance and a *proficiens*' struggle against it, viz. the paradoxical self-flattery that it motivates. Seneca's most delusive self-flattery opens the narrative series in the mock epic that is *Ep.* 53.¹⁷³ Even before Seneca unexpectedly compares himself to Ulysses at §4.4-7, he describes his leap from his ship: "Mindful of my skill [*memor artificii mei*] as a long-time devotee of cold baths, I threw myself into the sea just as befits a cold-water bather [*psychrolutam*] - fully clothed" (3.10-11). Motto and Clark and others are quite right to see a return in this letter to Seneca's claim in §50.2 that he need never look farther than himself to laugh at a clown (*fatuus*; 2.3).¹⁷⁴ Yet if the "clownishness" of *Ep.* 50 comprises the projection of our faults onto our circumstances (§1), Seneca's foolishness here illustrates the corresponding avoidance of faulting ourselves. Seneca's later meditation on our ethical *oblivio* accentuates this aspect of Seneca's attention (cf. *memor*) at this moment only to what he thinks laudable – hot baths are decadent for the Stoics¹⁷⁵ – despite, we might think, the self-evident pitifulness of his condition. As if to leave Seneca's blind clownishness unquestionable, Seneca's subsequent claim of Ulysses as a co-*nausiator* (4.6) – the most paradoxical and egregious moment of deceptive self-flattery in the opening letters of Book 6 – combines both aspects: in blaming Ulysses' misadventures on sea-sickness, Seneca projects his own faults onto the hero as an excuse for his own foolish behavior (in addition to the self-

¹⁷³ On the satirizing epic language and imagery of *Ep.* 53, see, e.g., Motto and Clark (1971) and Berno (2006) 40-42, 55 (on the Vergil quotations at §3), 58 (on *mitto me in mare*) and 62-65 (on *Ulixem*); cf. Ronnick (1995).

¹⁷⁴ Motto and Clark (1971) 220 with Berno (2006) 40 and Mazzoli (1991) 81. Consider also the parallel use of *incredibilis* at *Ep.* 50.2.4 and *Ep.* 53.4.3.

¹⁷⁵ Seneca included, see Berno (2006) 57-58.

projection this analogy suggests in Seneca's claim of *cum me ferre non possem* at §4.4) at the same time as his base behavior is simultaneously crowned as heroic by the comparison.

Both this incongruous self-flattery and the contradictory conflation of agency and passivity are conspicuously absent in *Ep.* 54 and 55, and Seneca appears to be making good progress. Beginning in *Ep.* 54, Seneca is able to remain calm as he endures a painful asthma attack.¹⁷⁶ While he recognizes that he is not yet a sage (7.3-4), Seneca still prides himself on his active engagement with death: “Nevertheless there is virtue [*virtus*] even in this: I am indeed forced out [*eicior*, sc. by death], but as if I am taking my leave [*exeam*]” (7.4-5). We may also see a parallel improvement in self-representation and movement away from ethical “clownishness” when Seneca remarks in *Ep.* 54.3 that he would be acting “laughably” (*ridicule*; 3.1) if he were pleased with surviving his asthma attack as if it were the same thing as sound health. And Seneca then turns from this confident account of himself in *Ep.* 54 to an outward-directed analysis of a seductive yet false leisure (*otium*) that is in fact vicious torpor (*ignavia*) in the patrician Servilius Vatia and his villa in *Ep.* 55. Yet Seneca opens *Ep.* 55 with the following first-person narrative (§1.1-2.4):

I come right now from a ride in my litter no less tired than if I had walked for as long as I sat. It is indeed work [*labor*] even to be carried for a while, and I do not know whether it is even more so, since it is contrary to nature [*contra naturam*], who gave us feet so that we would walk on our own [*per nos*] and eyes to see. Luxury [*deliciae*] imposes infirmity [*debilitatem*], and we cease to be able to do what we are continually [*diu*] unwilling to do. However, for me it was necessary to shake up my body in order that, whether it was bile that clogged up my windpipe [*faucibus*] or my breathing [*spiritus*] itself was compromised [*densior*] for some reason, the jostling [*iactatio*] would dislodge or relieve it, an event I have learned to be beneficial for me.

Does this not mark his persona as “a slothful hypochondriac and a passive voice,” equally illustrative of the letter’s distinction between *otium* and *ignavia*?¹⁷⁷ Perhaps, if the letter is tak-

¹⁷⁶ On Seneca’s asthma, see Lana (1988) 151-154, Berno (2006) 122-124, and Pisi (1981).

¹⁷⁷ Motto and Clark (1973a) 195.

en on its own. But following *Ep.* 54, his paradoxical remark that “it is in fact work to be carried for a while” – in another’s mouth, a delusively passive experience of a projection of one’s own *debilitas* – reflects in Seneca, given the contextualized health benefits of a litter’s *iactatio*, the result of the same agency we saw concerning his previous handling of asthma that, as it were, works with rather than against an unavoidable physical ailment.¹⁷⁸

Be that as it may, when Seneca returns his attention from Vatia’s life and dwelling to his own in *Ep.* 56, where we now find him staying above a cacophonous bathhouse (1.2-3), his progress unexpectedly proves, to both himself and the reader, more restricted than *Ep.* 53, *Ep.* 54, and 55 would at first suggest and so reshapes our reading of his persona and experience when viewed across these letters.¹⁷⁹

First, the return of both the contradictory vacillation between agency and passivity and paradoxical self-flattery in Seneca’s experience in *Ep.* 56 belies the progress he proclaims within it. “May I die [*peream*, i.e. “I swear”]¹⁸⁰ if silence is as necessary for one secluded in study as is thought [*videtur*],” Seneca confidently declares at the letter’s opening (1.1-2). Despite his distracting surroundings, Seneca boasts that he is unbothered (*fremitum non... curo*; 3.3-5) and undistracted by it (5.4-5) and so proclaims “let everything resound outside, so long as there is no turmoil [*tumultus*] within” (5.5-6). Yet Seneca’s claims of self-mastery rest uneasily alongside his recounted experience. Motto and Clark, among others, note that the length and detailed descriptions of the bath’s distractions at §1-2 and §4 betray a rather close

¹⁷⁸ This interpretation also avoids the contradiction that results from Motto and Clark’s (1973a) 198 claim that the benefits of Seneca’s “foolish transit,” while apparently not legitimate nor exculpatory for Seneca, nonetheless should be read as looking forward to the real didactic benefits of the letter itself. On this metaliterary reading (which I think insightful) of the opening, see also Henderson (2004) 67-92.

¹⁷⁹ On Seneca’s contradictory self-description in *Ep.* 56, cf. Motto and Clark (1970), Mazzoli (1991) 80-81, and Thomsen (1971).

¹⁸⁰ On *peream* as a colloquial oath, see sources listed in Berno (2006) 250.

attention on Seneca's part.¹⁸¹ More than this, these sounds seem to exert an irresistibly negative affective effect on the mind: They themselves "are able to incite the ears to displeasure" (*in odium possunt aures adducere*; 1.4).¹⁸² If Seneca's distinction in §4 between the greater distraction of *vox* versus mere *crepitus*, for only *vox* "engages the mind" (*animum adducit*; 4.2), suggests an expanded notion of mental agency, it equally contradicts Seneca's initial claim to undistracted *studia* (as the distraction itself became the focus) and his earlier boast at §3.3-5 that he is as unbothered by *all* the din as he is by running water.¹⁸³ A similar dynamic can be seen in the ambiguous self-flattery that follows this boast. He adds, "[I am unbothered...], although [*quamvis*] I have heard that the sole reason for a certain people to move their city was because they could not endure the roar [*fragorem*] of the falling Nile" (5-7). The meaning of this addendum is unclear: in the way most natural to the triumphant tone, Berno takes it to be another example of Seneca's paradoxical heroic allusions, comparing the sounds of the bathhouse to a Nile waterfall in his own favor.¹⁸⁴ On the other hand, in the way most natural (it seems to me) to the sense of the sentence, Margaret Graver and Anthony Long's translation – "I've heard, though..." – suggests a qualification to Seneca's self-assurance.¹⁸⁵ Yet this ambiguity may be part of the point: the Senecan persona unreasonably flatters himself, but his very overreach presents the opportunity to recognize his own conceit. With the crash of the Nile cataracts in mind, how stable is the pride in enduring "the shrill voice of a boat-swain" (5.2)? And finally, even Seneca's closing assertion of self-mastery – "I force [*cogo*] the mind to focus on itself and not be distracted by what is outside it" (5.4-5) – envisions dis-

¹⁸¹ Motto and Clark (1970) 103. See also Thomsen (1971) 181 and Berno (2006) 261-262.

¹⁸² Cf. "If a ballplayer joined and began to count his throws, I'm done for" (*si vero pilicrepus supervenit et numerare coepit pilas, actum est*; 1.10-12), and "Even now sound that is repeatedly interrupted more bothersome [*molestior*] to me than what is continuous" (4.5-5.2).

¹⁸³ Cf. Berno (2006) 267 and Thomsen (1971) 181.

¹⁸⁴ Berno (2006) 266.

¹⁸⁵ Graver and Long (2015).

traction as actively avoidable only through mental compulsion and so confuses mere self-control for the tranquil flow of the sage's mind (cf. "Know that your mind is settled [*compositum*] when no disturbance can reach [*pertinebit*] you."; 14.3-4).¹⁸⁶

Second, just as Seneca's meditation that stems from his failed voyage in *Ep.* 53 locates his error in the broader context of projecting self-ignorance, so too does Seneca's meditation that follows his putative success above the bathhouse in *Ep.* 56, to greater and broader effect. The substance of Seneca's self-mastery at §1-5 is questioned by Seneca's persona himself when he abstracts from this experience how true calm is made only by a mind quieted by perfected reason (6.2) and distressing distraction is "the [sc. foolish] mind crying out" (*animus... obstrepit*; 7.6).¹⁸⁷ For Seneca now proposes in §9-10 that "*we* often think ourselves" (*saepe videmur*; 4) improved, when in fact our desires have only subsided in fatigue, frustration, or fear (9.6-8) and will continue to disturb us "as strongly as they are unnoticed [*occultius*]" (10.4).¹⁸⁸ And his supposed self-mastery is unambiguously subverted by the end, when in response to an interlocutor's final query – "Is it not sometimes preferable [*commodius*] to be free of racket?" (15.1-2) – Seneca writes in closing:

I admit it [*fateor*]. And so I will go [*migrabo*] from this place. I wished to test and train myself: why is it necessary to be tortured [*torqueri*] for so long, when Ulysses found so easy a remedy for his comrades against even the Sirens? Farewell. (15.2-5)

Giancarlo Mazzoli rightly argues that this unexpected closing, in its ironic contradiction of the opening oath,¹⁸⁹ refigures Seneca's persona in *Ep.* 56 as a counterpoint of a mind that

¹⁸⁶ Cf. Thomsen (1971) 180-181.

¹⁸⁷ Consider also the fact that Seneca's meditations on projecting self-ignorance in both *Ep.* 53.5-8 and *Ep.* 56.5-10 interrelate it with dreamful sleep – analogically in *Ep.* 53, literally in *Ep.* 56.

¹⁸⁸ There is some debate over whether Seneca includes himself in *videmur*. So, e.g., Edwards (1997) 23 and Motto and Clark (1970) 103 take it to refer only to Seneca, while Thomsen (1971) 176 denies it includes Seneca at all. While Thomsen (1971) 176-177 is right to refute Motto and Clark's interpretation that these first person plural verbs refer *just* to Seneca, his unreasonable suggestion that Seneca does not refer at all to himself would be a strikingly unusual use of the first-person plural in the *Letters*.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. *peream* at §1.1 and *fateor* at §15.2.

falls short of (and so compromises on) the ideal, tranquil mind discussed in §5-8.¹⁹⁰ But this is not the end of it.

While Seneca's surprising admission of imperfection at §15 reconfigures his persona in *Ep.* 56 as an *exemplum* of an imperfectly tranquil mind at practice, his acknowledgements of imperfection throughout *Ep.* 56 reconfigure his persona across the opening letters of Book 6. Seneca's last confession at §15 unmistakably recalls *Ep.* 53 through (*inter alia*) its language of *fateri* and creative allusion to Ulysses.¹⁹¹ Thus, as a final and clear invitation to reconsider the Senecan experience in *Ep.* 56 as a point in the arc of particularized Stoic study and practice started at the opening of Book 6, with projecting self-ignorance re-centered, the Senecan persona is recast as an *exemplum* of a false start in self-awareness, hindered by the progress he has made, which has motivated self-deception in mistaking progress in one domain as progress in all.¹⁹² In the first place, Seneca's persona in the opening (§1-5) of *Ep.* 56 fails to attend to the *oblivio* rendered by projecting self-ignorance recognized in *Ep.* 53. Indeed, whereas in *Ep.* 53 Seneca admits his own fault (to some degree) in his shipwreck immediately following it (§4), Seneca first mistakes success in *Ep.* 56, which only gives way to a similarly paradoxical and self-flattering admission similar to *Ep.* 53's following reflection, despite the experiences' similar form of agency-passivity confusion.¹⁹³ Secondly, if the reader

¹⁹⁰ Mazzoli (1991) 80-81 with Motto and Clark (1970). In arguing against Motto and Clark's suggestion that *Ep.* 56 involves a reversal in Seneca's self-presentation, Thomsen (1971) 181 n. 82 claims that this final admission "can be called 'the most striking reversal of the whole epistle' only if one has read the introduction superficially." Quite so, but it is my contention that the letter, within the narrative series of *Ep.* 53-57, invites this superficial reading, even as it contains the details to recognize upon reconsideration what we missed.

¹⁹¹ Cf. also the prominence of *torqueri* in *Ep.* 53.1-4 and *Ep.* 56.15 and the parallel of the preceding claims begun with *scito* at §4.4 and §13 respectively.

¹⁹² If, as it seems, Seneca paid close attention to the Socrates of Plato's dialogues, we should perhaps not be surprised that Seneca attends to this aspect of self-ignorance, which, with the term "transferred ignorance," Katja Vogt (2012a) identifies as Socrates' central concern in his condemnation of self-ignorance in the *Apology*.

¹⁹³ True, Seneca's fault seems greater in *Ep.* 53 than *Ep.* 56, and more obvious, but one of the principal admonitions of Seneca's meditation on projecting-self-ignorance in *Ep.* 53 is the need for particular vigilance where we are inclined to see no fault.

does not yet suspect self-deception in *Ep.* 56 at §1-5, given the similarity in paradoxical experience, his acceptance of Senecan progress is unexpectedly subverted, as we have seen, by Seneca's acknowledgments of imperfection in the subsequent meditation of §9-11, which qualify Seneca's progress in *Ep.* 54 and 55. Although in *Ep.* 55 Seneca astutely recognizes in Vatia a listless, self-indulgent *inertia* (5.7) as a delusory shadow (cf. *mendacio*; 4.5) of the sage's contented *otium*, this critical eye in *Ep.* 56 at first fails to catch Seneca's own "counterfeited soundness" (*simulata sanitate*; 10.8-9) that masks a restless, dissatisfied *inertia* (8.6) such that "we think we are at ease, but we are not" (*otiosi videmur, et non sumus*; 10.9). And what constitutes real *otium*?

If we are [*otiosi*] in truth, if we have sounded the retreat, if we think little of what falsely seems good [*speciosa contempsimus*]... nothing will distract [*avocabit*] us – no attractive call of man or bird [*hominum aviumque concentus*] will interrupt our good thinking [*cogitationes*], now sound and certain [*solidasque iam et certa*]. (§11)

Even as this looks ahead to Seneca's admission at §15,¹⁹⁴ so too does it retroactively limit Seneca's ability in *Ep.* 54 "to grow calm in satisfied and brave thinking" (*cogitationibus laetis ac fortibus adquiescere*; 3.4-5) faced with the distractions of physical illness, and this limiting goes equally for the litter scene of *Ep.* 55.

In hindsight, Seneca's illusory lack of distraction (cf. *sine avocatio*; 4.3) by sounds in *Ep.* 56 draws out Seneca's distraction from his own *vitia* across Book 6. When Seneca's successful calm during *Ep.* 54's asthma attack gives him the opportunity to appraise his progress, his even qualified suggestion of *virtus* (7.5) – in light of *Ep.* 56 – now appears as self-flattery and distraction from the exhortation against self-deceptive *oblivio* in *Ep.* 53. After Seneca's experience on his litter at §1-2 of *Ep.* 55 confirms this "progress" and self-flattery, he is distracted from his own faults by those of others in *Ep.* 55. Seneca may well have suc-

¹⁹⁴ Berno (2006) 303 points out that Seneca's reference to *concentus hominum aviumque* prospectively interrelates our collective failure to achieve this real *otium* with his personal admission of failure at §15 and its allusion to Sirens.

cessfully avoided a state of mind deceived by the false *otium* of pleasure and decadence, but to focus then on this in others – as he continues to do in his description of the bathers below him in *Ep.* 56.1-2¹⁹⁵ – become the self-satisfied inattention to other ways he mistakes *otium* unmasked in *Ep.* 56.

Has Seneca then made any progress in self-awareness on this integrating reading? Yes: *Ep.* 56's meditation on projecting self-ignorance more immediately relates to the experience of Seneca's persona across Book 6. Even if *Ep.* 53's reflection on *oblivio* affirms seeing projecting self-ignorance at work in Seneca's experience of rough waters, the letter leaves opaque how precisely this particular reflection stems from and maps back onto his experience at sea,¹⁹⁶ in effect distancing Seneca's theoretical thinking from its personal application. But when Seneca again reflects on projecting self-ignorance in *Ep.* 56, his train of thought from an avowed mental "calm" (§1-5) to our self-deceptive projection of mental turmoil as external "distraction" (§5-8) poses both a more natural abstraction and also an explicit mechanism for the agency-passivity conflation we have traced in Seneca's foolish experience in *Ep.* 53 and 56. And Seneca's return at §9-11 to our precipitancy toward *oblivio* not only logically flows from the self-deceptive projection sampled in §5-8 and to Seneca's personal recognition of his imperfect mental-mastery (§15), but also, as we have seen, incorporates questioning of Seneca's own experience in the two preceding letters. Equally, Seneca's return in §15 to a comparison between his own quite mundane circumstances and the heroic exploits of Ulysses exemplifies a similar sort of counter-intuitive admission of (blameless) *vitia*

¹⁹⁵ Cf., e.g., the preening weight-lifters (1.4-7), the *inertus* man *contentus lebeia unctione* (1.7-8), and the armpit hair plucker (2.4-6).

¹⁹⁶ Consider the disagreements between scholars on how to interpret the reflection in light of the opening scene: compare Kölle (1975) 35-45 with Berno (2006) 67-68, who sees the physically ill man's unwise endurance mirrored by Seneca's endurance of the swim to shore in his foolish attempts to escape a lesser discomfort, and Motto and Clark (1971) 221, who interpret the reflection as an unconvincing segue suggesting that Seneca forgot before his voyage that he got seasick.

as self-flattery of the Ulysses' allusion in *Ep.* 53. Yet, on the one hand, Seneca's alignment of himself now with Ulysses' crew (*sociis*) in need of Ulysses' assistance represents a less extravagant self-flattery. And on the other hand, even if his present solution, a change of circumstances (*itaque ego ex hoc loco migrabo*), may seem to place him among those who, like Fatua, think their discontent stems from their environment,¹⁹⁷ it is here more a recognition of his imperfect state of mind that cannot yet properly manage the circumstances, as his "testing and training of himself" (*experiri et exercere me*; 15.3) still results in distress (cf. *torqueri*; 15.4). The Senecan mind depicted across Book 6 so far serves as an *exemplum* of a false start at self-awareness, but if he erred at first in failing to attend to his projecting self-ignorance in more than theory, *Ep.* 56 marks a success, as the Senecan persona reconsiders the narratives' experiences with an eye to projecting self-ignorance and, through this, both recognizes his own failures so far and gets clearer on the precise nature of his projecting self-ignorance and its mechanics.

As scholars have often noted, *Ep.* 57 returns in the narrative arc to *Ep.* 53, when Seneca once again is faced with a "voyage" ("...I nonetheless seemed to have sailed"; 1.3) around the Bay of Naples.¹⁹⁸ However, while *Ep.* 57 and *Ep.* 53 form a ring-composition in the "plot" of Book 6, *Ep.* 57 takes on additional significance as what follows the thematic ring-composition marked by *Ep.* 56's reconsideration of the self-ignorance noted in *Ep.* 53. *Ep.* 57 may see Seneca's persona struggle again with the travails of travel gone wrong, but here the situated self-investigation that Seneca better succeeds at in *Ep.* 56 reaches its fullest fruition in two forms that bridge Seneca's cultivated *exemplum* of progress in seeing through

¹⁹⁷ Cf. not only *Ep.* 50 but also *Ep.* 2, *Ep.* 9, *Ep.* 23, *Ep.* 28, and *Ep.* 69 as well, with Montiglio (2006). Seneca's very language of *migrare* calls Fatua, her thinking that physical movement (cf. *rogat ut migret*; *Ep.* 50.2.6), and the ethical blindness she symbolizes to the reader's mind, for *migrare* is a rare verb in the *Letters*, appearing only eight times (*Ep.* 19.4, *Ep.* 28.5, *Ep.* 49.6, *Ep.* 50.2, *Ep.* 56.15, *Ep.* 69.1, *Ep.* 70.17, and *Ep.* 108.20).

¹⁹⁸ See, e.g., Motto and Clark (1973b) 33, Henderson (2006) 141, Berno (2006) 332-333, and Mazzoli (1991) 84.

his own projecting self-ignorance that bridges this aspect of the personal narrative series into the seemingly unrelated *Ep.* 58: One, Seneca’s personal insight from the application of the Stoic theory of unavoidable “pre-emotions” (*propathēiai*) to his own experience, and, two, a self-flattery that evinces not just a high degree of self-awareness, but in fact doubles as a mechanism for inviting us to read ourselves into this narrative exemplarity and to simultaneously distinguishing and linking the fool’s and the sage’s experiences of the same circumstances, thus offering a crowning primer for the more similar if broader thrust of *Ep.* 58.

In *Ep.* 57, Seneca takes another distressful “voyage” (1.3) through a claustrophobic tunnel (*crypta*; 1.5), but this trip is immediately marked as a different experience. On the one hand, Seneca now recognizes his own agency in the motivated reasoning of *Ep.* 53, for he acknowledges at the opening of *Ep.* 57 that, in order to avoid another voyage, “I readily believed [*facile credidi*] there to be a storm” (1.1-2) (cf. the passive *persuaderi... persuasum est* of *Ep.* 53.1). On the other hand, while the primary paradoxicality up to *Ep.* 57 has been Seneca’s conflicting experiences of agency and his own advancement, now the environment itself appears paradoxical:

Nothing is longer than this cell [*carvere*], nothing more obscuring [*obscurius*] than these torches, which allow us to see the shadows [*tenebras*] themselves, not through them. Moreover, even if the place were to have light, it would be eliminated by the dust, a burdensome and annoying thing just in the open – what about there, when, since it was shut in without any vent, the dust rolled about on itself [*in se volutatur*] and redounded on those by whom it was stirred up? We endured two mutually exclusive troubles [*duo incommoda inter se contraria*] at the same time: we suffered on the same path, on the same day because of mud and dust. (§2)

If this shift and the obvious Platonic undertones of this poorly enlightening, imprisoning *crypta* at first seem to signal a metaphysical question (whether about the body or the world), the scene’s imagery equally invites us, more than any of the preceding narratives, to see in

these undertones the deceptive power of ignorance.¹⁹⁹ The epistemic metaphor of the *tenebrae* of ignorance now made visible and the psychological language of the tunnel's distressing dust that "rolls about on itself" (*in se volutatur*; 2.5) both look forward to *Ep.* 58 and Seneca's Platonized framing in which it fits.²⁰⁰ And this psychological and epistemic emphasis is confirmed when Seneca recognizes something about the workings of the mind in his experience.

Provoked to thought by this unusual *obscuritas* (3.1), Seneca pinpoints in what circumstances our experience is, in fact, passive, in contrast to the delusions the foolish mind creates. Recalling a topic already raised in *Ep.* 11, Seneca considers how he then felt what the fool and sage alike cannot help but feel, viz. a mental blow (*ictum*) and "alteration" (*mutationem*; 3.2) from "the newness of the unaccustomed circumstances" (*insolitae rei novitas*) and its "distastefulness" (*foeditas*; 3.3).²⁰¹ These so-called *propatheiai* are the mark of the mortal psychophysical nature, which virtue does not eliminate (4.1-3). Arising neither from conscious consideration nor assent (cf. *incogitata et iniussa*; 6.3), they are affective events without being emotions (cf. 4.5-6 and 6.1-2).²⁰² This itself spurs a parallel line of thought:

I then began to consider this, how we foolishly [*inepte*] fear certain things more or less, when the end [*finis*] of all of them is the same. Indeed what difference is there between a mountain or a balcony [*vigilarium*]²⁰³ crushing someone? You will find nothing. Yet there are those who fear the former collapse more, although each is equally deadly. Thus fear looks to the cause [*efficientia*], not the effect. (6.3-9)

This paradoxical irrationality, in which the foolish mind actively imagines salient differences to produce incoherent fears, draws a pointed contrast with the passive, unmediated, and re-

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Henderson (2006) 142, Motto and Clark (1973b), Mazzoli (1991) 85, and Schönegg (1999) 73-76.

²⁰⁰ On *volutare* as denoting psychological turmoil, cf. *Ep.* 22.8, *Ep.* 48.8, *Ep.* 71.27, *Ep.* 79.12, *Ep.* 99.9, *Ep.* 101.9 and Chapter Three Section III.A. On this Platonized framing, see Chapter Three. On the dynamics of the Platonic allusions in *Ep.* 57 see, esp., Schönegg (1999) 73-76.

²⁰¹ Berno (2006) 345 convincingly suggests *foeditas* here refers to the natural aversion (not itself an emotion) we feel towards things such as death, darkness, and ugliness.

²⁰² See also *Ep.* 11, *Ep.* 99.18-19, *Const.* 10.3-4, *Ira* 2.2-4 with Inwood (1993), Rist (1989) 1999-2003 on *propatheiai* in Seneca and Graver (2007) 85-108 and Abel (1983).

²⁰³ I borrow this translation of *vigilarium* from Graver and Long (2015).

flexive nature (cf. *ferietur animus, mutabitur color*; 3.6) of the sage's *propaetheiai* which, precisely for this reason, may seem inconsistent (cf. e.g. "Thus brave [sages], though utterly prepared to pout out their own blood, are unable to look upon another's"; 5.1-3). At the same time, the fool's experience and the sage's are related. Why do we fear death by mountain more than by balcony? Though unanswered in *Ep.* 57,²⁰⁴ the presumed paradoxicality (cf. *raritas, novitas, ex insolito*) of these sorts of events is commonly blamed elsewhere, an explanation that extends neatly to *Ep.* 57's contrast of a falling mountain with the more commonplace building collapse.²⁰⁵ Yet if the imperfect and perfect mind both react at an unfamiliar and discomfiting stimulus, only the fool makes something of it. The matter strikes only him as, in fact, paradoxical and so distressing (cf. "We are thus punished for our carelessness when frightened by something as if it were novel [*novis*], though it is not novel, just uncommon *insolita*."; *N.Q.* 3.2.1) and in this active line of thinking unnecessarily builds the mere mental *mutatio* – itself *incogitata et iniussa* – into an emotional "disturbance" (*perturbatio*; 6.1).²⁰⁶ In this distinction, Seneca delineates in his experience between mere surprise and the foolish, affective process of finding something paradoxical (*mirari*) that we have seen elsewhere.²⁰⁷ Equally, this looks forward to the reconfiguration of our foolish, distressing *mirari* to the sage's tranquil admiration at virtue and its embodiment in the coherent cosmos that *Ep.* 58 calls for, especially in its exhortation that "we marvel" (*miremur*; 27.6) at god and the eternal *formae*.²⁰⁸

Moreover, Seneca's discussion of the distinction between propathic *mutatio* and vicious *perturbatio* takes the form of a particularly paradoxical yet self-conscious sort of self-

²⁰⁴ Seneca tells us only that it isn't because we think it deadlier. Cf. Summers (1910) 242.

²⁰⁵ See, e.g., *NQ* 6.3.2, *NQ* 1.8-9, *Ep.* 91, and *Ep.* 14 with Chapter Two Section III.C. For the not uncommon danger of collapsing buildings in Roman cities, cf. Juvenal 3.190-231.

²⁰⁶ On the details of this process, see *Ira* 2.4.1 with Kaufman (2014) 119-126.

²⁰⁷ See esp. Chapter One Section III, Chapter Two Section III.C, and Chapter Three Section III.

²⁰⁸ See Chapter Three Section IV.B.

flattery that both signals the universal force contained in Senecan exemplarity and also encapsulates the productive self-awareness exhorted across the first half of Book 6. From §3-6, Seneca unexpectedly switches back and forth between claiming the experience of a sage and that of a fool. He writes:

I felt [*sensz*] a certain mental blow [*ictum animi*] and an alteration with fear that the newness of the unaccustomed circumstances and its distastefulness at the same time created. I am not speaking to you about myself right now, I who am far from being a passable [*tolerabilz*] let alone perfect person, but about that one over whom fortune has lost her jurisdiction [*in quem fortuna ius perdidit*]: even the mind of that one is struck and its color changed. (§3)

And yet, following Seneca's example of the *propatheiai* of the wise in §4-5, he takes up again the mask of the sage – “thus I felt [*sensz*], as I was saying, not a certain emotion, but a certain alteration” (6.1-2) – only to take it back off, for good, immediately after (cf. *timeremus*; 6.5). As Catherine Edwards notes, this slippage in character represents “an especially startling shift when the letter began from the allegedly personal experience of Seneca's journey through the tunnel.”²⁰⁹ And from this self-conscious “assumption of a role,” Edwards argues that “Seneca... renders problematic all his apparently confessional statements about his own experiences and feelings.”²¹⁰ Certainly, as Edwards suggests, this renders the “true” Senecan self quite elusive, but for our purposes the critical effect is the destabilization of the Senecan persona as the sole figure of this experience in *Ep.* 57 and, by extension, each experience expressed in the first-person narratives from *Ep.* 53 on. And so, at the series' conclusion, Seneca forcefully reiterates the general applicability of *exempla* we have seen him theorize and insinuate throughout the *Letters* by formally embedding it in the *exemplum* itself.

Nonetheless, while Seneca's vacillating identification with the sage's experience creates distance between it and his (and our) foolish experience, it does so in a way that simul-

²⁰⁹ Edwards (1997) 33.

²¹⁰ Edwards (1997) 34.

taneously draws us closer to a recognizable aspect of that distinct way of being. Unlike the Senecan persona of *Ep.* 56, who fails at first, in his self-ignorance, to distinguish between the distinct experiences of mere self-control (*animum... cogo sigi intentum esse*; 5.4-5) and that of real self-mastery, *Ep.* 57's Seneca engages in his self-conscious role-playing in the context of the sage's experience of *propatheiai*, which, as Seneca's *meditatio* at §3-6 draws out, is a *naturalis adfectio* (4.6) unavoidably experienced by fool and wise alike, although the fool actively reacts to it irrationally and emotionally. As such, although, on the one hand, Seneca's positioning of himself as a sage may initially strike the reader as a climactic and hyperbolic example of the self-deceptive flattery of the Senecan persona throughout the narrative letters of Book 6, ultimately, on the other hand, this positioning represents the clearest and culminating *exemplum* across the narrative series of a fool "seeing through" his own flawed experience to what it would be like if he experienced the same event as a sage, in precisely the context that bridging this gap would be, in Stoic theory, most immediately graspable to the fool.

V: Conclusion – To *Ep.* 58 and on

Ep. 58 brings with it an important shift in the *Letters*. It opens with a similarly situated narrative as the preceding letters of Book 6, yet the event and focus are quite different. No longer is Seneca out and about engaging with the broader world, whether in action or in thought, but now reports to Lucilius on a philosophical conversation he recently had with a small group of friends. Moreover, the reported conversation shifts our attention from Stoicism and the Roman context to two "foreign" systems, firstly the Greek language, for which Seneca and his friends struggle to find adequate Latin translations (§1-7), and secondly the philosophy of Platonism, whose terminology the group seeks to translate and discuss (§8-22). As scholars have noted, the dense doxography of *Ep.* 58 is new to the *Letters* so far and

marks a transition in its pedagogical trajectory, in which Lucilius (and by extension at least some of the readers) is gauged advanced enough to engage fruitfully with other schools of thought and in sophisticated theorization.²¹¹ In this transition, Beat Schönegg goes so far as to suggest a shift to a new “way of thinking,” from the “pictorial-intuitive comprehension” of *Ep.* 57’s mimetic narrative to a “linguistic-rational understanding” (*verbal-rationalen Verstehen*) fostered through the considerations of translation and abstract (metaphysical) theorization and a corresponding “rational-intellectual” (*rational-intellektuelle*) pedagogical approach.²¹² While Schönegg’s terminology expresses, mistakenly in my opinion, Seneca’s supposed acceptance and bridging in *Ep.* 58 of a Platonic distinction between rational and emotional and “abstract” and “concrete” modes of thought, it nonetheless captures in outline the difference in focus and process between the situated, discursive, and exemplary investigations of the first-person narratives of the first half of the *Letters*, as well as the general form of the early letters, and the increasingly formal, theoretical, and dialectical letters of the second half of the work.

However, despite this shift in topic, context, and mode of argumentation, the philosophical leap from *Ep.* 57 to *Ep.* 58 is not as great as may first appear and need not signal an emergence, wholesale, into the “wonder world” of Platonic metaphysics.²¹³ As Schönegg rightly suggests, the first instance of Platonic doxography within the *Letters* does not accidentally follow a letter centered around Seneca’s travel through a dark, prison-like tunnel.²¹⁴ In addition to the Platonic resonances already noted, *Ep.* 57 ends with a brief and inconclusive

²¹¹ Cf. Schönegg (1999) 75, Schafer (2014) 282-284, Griffin (2007) 93-94, and Dietsche (2014) 266-271 with Wilson (2001) 184-186

²¹² Schönegg (1999) 80-81.

²¹³ Schönegg (1999) 77-78.

²¹⁴ Schönegg (1999) 73-107.

(cf. “Thus it must be looked into...”) consideration, driven by the body-mind/soul interaction instantiated in *propatheiai*, on the immortality of the soul and its existence beyond and outside of the body (§7-9). While this at first looks ahead to the eschatology central to the Platonism discussed in *Ep.* 58,²¹⁵ its use as a bridge never materializes, for the immortality of the soul is never in fact addressed there. Moreover, if, as Schönegg suggests, the tunnel of *Ep.* 57 symbolically marks a sort of Platonic “cave” through which the *Letters* connect with Platonic ideas, he also recognizes that Seneca’s thinking remains distinctly Stoic, for if he comes to wonder about the soul’s immortality, it nonetheless remains un-Platonically material (cf. *animus, qui ex tenuissimo constant*; 8.5).²¹⁶ Indeed, given what we know of orthodox Stoic thought, Seneca’s suggestion in §7 that he disagrees with the Stoics in general (cf. *putas de Stoicis dicere*) in wondering about the survival of the soul outside of the body is surprising, for this was an open question throughout Stoicism’s history, and it seems the continued existence of at least the sage’s soul was a potentially acceptable position.²¹⁷ Even, then, as Seneca draws on Platonic imagery, language, and framing in his Stoic thinking at *Ep.* 57, he never gives the careful reader reason to expect acceptance from the consideration of Platonism in *Ep.* 58.

While, as Schönegg suggests, Seneca “comes close to Plato and yet remains a world apart from him” in *Ep.* 57, we saw last chapter that (*contra* Schönegg and others) this remains true in *Ep.* 58 as well.²¹⁸ It has been my suggestion here that the whole first-person narrative series that begins in *Ep.* 53 and culminates in *Ep.* 57 forms a coherent whole that fosters the

²¹⁵ Cf. Henderson (2006) 145, Schönegg (1999) 73-76, Mazzoli (1991) 85, and Motto and Clark (1973b).

²¹⁶ Schönegg (1999).

²¹⁷ See, esp., Eusebius, *Pr. Ev.* 1.5.20.6 (=LS 53W). This inconsistency leads Summers (1910) 242 to suggest possible textual corruption.

²¹⁸ See, esp., Chapter Three Section IV.

sort of mindset that would recognize and make salutary use of the careful balancing act that Seneca performs with Platonism, begun in *Ep.* 57 and carried through to the investigations of *Ep.* 58. Across the first-person narratives leading up to *Ep.* 58, Seneca uses paradoxicality in his reported experience and in the letters themselves to build himself into an *exemplum* of both the fool's projecting self-ignorance and also of the fitful development of his awareness of it and its operation that accompanies and personalizes the theoretic issues this raises. Through this, these letters promote reflection and investigation that sees in one's experience of the physical world first and foremost the workings of the mind. And so when Lucilius (or some interlocutor) asks Seneca at §25 in *Ep.* 58 what immediate benefit (*proderit*; 25.1) the consideration of Platonic metaphysical subtleties provides, Seneca signals the continuation of this introspecting perspective with his remark on his habit of always finding something for ethical reformation (26.1-3), a mode of thinking that the preceding narrative letters of Book 6 have explicitly exemplified.²¹⁹ Upon this invocation, he proceeds to recount what can be ultimately read, we have seen, as a generalized outline of the existential results of the fool's ignorance and the sage's wisdom in the way they are experienced (*viz.* as concrete) and to be seen through as the psychological effects they are – the experiences of the Senecan persona from *Ep.* 53 through 57 writ large.

Nonetheless, despite this continuity in message, *Ep.* 58 does initiate a lasting transition in methodology. The first exhortation of Book 6 declares: “Let us thus wake up [*sc.* to *sua vitia*], in order that we are able to refute our errors” (*expergimscamur ergo, ut errores nostros coarguere possimus*; *Ep.* 53.8.3-4). Contained in this counsel are two mutually reinforcing stages of a Stoic *proficiens* advancement towards wisdom and virtue: (1) to recognize their own igno-

²¹⁹ Cf. *hoc coepi tecum cogitare*; *Ep.* 53.5.2-3, *cogitationibus laetis ac fortibus adquiescere*; *Ep.* 54.3.4-5, *ex consuetudine tamen mea circumspicere coepi an aliquid illic invenirem quod mihi posset bono esse*; *Ep.* 55.3.1-2, *aliquid tamen mihi illa obscuritas quod cogitare dedit*; *Ep.* 57.3.1-2, and *illud deinde tecum loqui coepi*; *Ep.* 57.6.3-4 with Hachmann (1995) 257-262.

rance and viciousness and (2) to escape it through refuting the deception that is our foolishness (cf. “my whole way of life deceives me: expose [*coargue*] this...”; *Ep.* 45.10.2-3) through the full resolution of the paradoxes produced by the confusion and incoherency of our worldviews. While dialectic is the philosophical tool *par excellence* for this refutation and integration,²²⁰ if we are not even imperfectly awake to *our* ignorance and faults as such, how we sustain them, and how they underlie our dissatisfaction, Seneca maintains, there is real risk that progress in theoretical understanding will lack real effect in reforming the, as it were, operative substance of our worldviews. Yet, if so, the opening exhortation of Book 6 prefigures the meeting point formed by *Ep.* 58, where extended, detailed dialectic in the *Letters* begins and yet concludes with a culminating thrust towards self-awareness of our projecting self-ignorance begun by the exemplary narratives of earlier letters. Although the fool’s fitful advancement towards wisdom disallows any lapse in the *Letters* of a topic or methodology, *Ep.* 58 marks a moment in the pedagogical trajectory of the work at which the process of “waking up” to our ignorance and the paradoxical, dissatisfying experience it engenders may be far enough along for some to allow for the fruitful engagement in theoretical dialectic that in time completes this process.²²¹

²²⁰ Cf. esp. *Ep.* 89 and 109.17-18.

²²¹ Cf. Seneca’s praise to Lucilius in the opening of the final extant letter: “I am able to teach you the *praecepta* of old, unless you flee from it and are annoyed to learn their subtle thoughts’ [Vergil *Georg.* 1.176-177] Yet you do not flee nor does any involved topic [*subtilitas*] repel you. Your refinement [*elegantiae tuae*] is not of the sort to pursue only big issues, just as I applaud that you render everything into a means for some progress [*profectum*], and are put off only when some particularly involved topic does you no good [*nihil agitur*]. And I will indeed work against this now happening [sc. in this letter]” (*Ep.* 124.1.1-7).

Conclusion

Over these four chapters, I have argued that in Seneca's works, especially the *Letters on Ethics*, the paradoxical – i.e. that which contradicts and subverts our received worldview – and paradoxicality are a fundamental link between the content of his Stoic accounts of ignorance and wisdom and his way of arguing for these views and working to move his readers from the former state to the latter.

We have seen that Seneca's discussions and illustrations of ignorance unpack and emphasize the paradoxical experience that arises from Seneca's Stoic account of ignorance. Our ignorance comprises a disordered, unsteady, and incoherent worldview through which our experience is rendered, at a most basic level, confused, unexpectedly unstable, and contradictory, which is to say, paradoxical. Using Platonized imagery and modes of thinking, Seneca suggests that the distressing "world" we fools experience – which is distressing in no small part because it appears to us fractured and surprisingly fleeting – is in many ways an illusory product of our minds, quite distinct from the true, perfectly coherent cosmos and the satisfied experience of it by the sage. Nonetheless, while it is our worldviews that project their own dissatisfying imperfection onto the cosmos, the workings of our mind make recognizing this essential feature difficult, and one of the primary and initial challenges to our (Stoic) improvement is, as it were, seeing through this distorting and disturbing operation of our worldview as we continue to be influenced by it.

To articulate these views and counter the paradoxicality rendered by our ignorance, Seneca's works wield rhetorical and stylistic paradox in sophisticated and creative ways. Given the counter-intuitive positions of Stoicism, paradox is a natural and effective instrument of Stoic argumentation for provoking thought and facilitating the clarification of the conceptual confusion within our ignorant worldviews. Seneca's works follow in this tradition

and, indeed, extend this use of paradoxical claims to a broader array of instances of paradoxicality, as it was understood by the ancient Greek and Roman mind. If, as I have argued, Senecan philosophical theory “ontologizes” paradox in the life of the fool, insofar as it essentially qualifies the existence of the fool, Senecan style works towards this end in tandem. Paradoxicality in Seneca’s rhetoric reflects and reinforces this philosophical move and aims to support and more effectively reveal the underlying facts (as Seneca sees them) to the readers. Thus, in arguing for and aiming to expose the unreality of so many of our concerns, Seneca mirrors in our reading of his text our existential experience of a delusion “world.” Yet in this reflection, we are better able to see that this experience is the result of a competing set of commitments and conceptualizations that shape it. And since our ignorance works against our awareness of our worldview’s faulty informing of our experience, Seneca turns again in the *Letters* to the potency of paradox to catch our attention and spur our thought when he pairs it with the illustrative power of *exempla* – in this case, of Seneca himself – to attempt an initial exposure of this self-ignorance in his own readers.

If Seneca’s works hold out hope that one day we can become wise and truly flourish, they nevertheless withhold any false optimism about the time and effort this will take. The end is not in sight, and although we will not soon escape the distressing paradoxicality of our ignorance, Seneca’s works – and the *Letters* particularly – nonetheless aim to make paradoxicality in its many forms at least better serve our efforts to improve ourselves.

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